

the melody of syllabic dissonance (shark puppy, ooh ha ha) by eddiekissbrak

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - Rock Band, Anal Fingering, Anal Sex, Angst with a Happy Ending, Badass Eddie Kaspbrak, Banter, Bisexual Richie Tozier, Blow Jobs, Bottom Eddie Kaspbrak, Everyone Is Alive, Gay Eddie Kaspbrak, Grief/Mourning, Hurt/Comfort, M/M, Minor Character Death, Phone Sex, Recreational Drug Use, Slow Burn, bed sharing, ben hanscom is a thick man, bev/eddie friendship, even more bed sharing, for now....., happy endings i swear i swear!!!, homoerotic swimming pool scenes, let eddie run, like not kidding the entirety of the ninth chapter is just grief, lots of texting, more relationships/tags coming later but i dont want to Spoil anything, real rockstars doing real rockstar things, richie teases eddie in a public bathroom because hes a menace to society, stan gets the strap (offscreen)

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Original Female Character(s), Original Male Character(s), Patty Blum, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Bill Denbrough/Mike Hanlon, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Patricia Blum Uris/Stamley Uris

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-11-07

Updated: 2019-12-02

Packaged: 2019-12-18 04:47:38

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 10

Words: 56,937

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

it started out as a joke.

a richie took two bowls to the face while bill took four hits and now richie's watching him lay on the carpet and laugh about the fact baby sharks are called pups kind of joke.

a *'you know, shark puppy would be a good name for a band'* kind of joke.

a *'hey richie, didn't bev play p-per- drums in band?'* kind of joke, a *'doesn't stan p-play piano at tem-mple?'* kind of joke, a *'am I too high or does this s-sound like kind of a good idea?'* kind of joke.

a *this doesn't really feel like a joke*, kind of joke.

and then all of a sudden, it's not a joke at all.

1. bill

Author's Note:

so uh. yeah. here we go. also, sorry if lowercase text offends you - i am who i am.

first of all, HUGE thanks to:

- jane aka loml aka the entire reason anyone even KNOWS about shark puppy. without her we'd be nothing so jot that right down! [here's](#) the post that started a nationwide phenomenon
- jack for literally being the best cheerleader i could ever ask for and also giving me all my ideas
- east for designing [this INCREDIBLE shark puppy logo](#) and getting horny for grammar
- mickey for being a wonderful beta and promising me my tenses aren't THAT bad

PLEASE PAY ATTENTION TO TAGS! for the most part this is a light-hearted fic, but there's some stuff in later chapters that absolutely needs warnings. however, every fic of mine will ALWAYS have a happy ending, i swear. i won't write anything i wouldn't personally read.

it started out as a joke.

a richie took two bowls to the face while bill took four hits and now richie's watching him lay on the carpet and laugh about the fact baby sharks are called pups kind of joke.

a ' you know, shark puppy would be a good name for a band ' kind of joke.

a ' hey richie, didn't bev play p-per- drums in band? ' kind of joke, a ' doesn't stan p-play piano at tem-ple? ' kind of joke, a ' am i too high or does this s-sound like kind of a good idea? ' kind of joke.

a suddenly this doesn't feel so much like a joke , kind of joke.

and then all of a sudden, it's not a joke at all.

may, 2016

- derry, maine.

“let me know if i can get you kids anything else,” the waitress says sweetly (like this table hadn't been the bane of her existence for the past hour) as she slides the check between empty plates. richie winks at her and only barely contains a ‘thanks babe’ before he's falling back against the polyester of the booth.

“fuck, that was good,” he groans, and stan makes a face when richie pops the top button of his jeans open — you know, for maximum comfort. bill pinches the bridge of his nose. “better than sex, i'd say.”

“how would you know?” stan comments, delicately wiping the ketchup from the corner of his mouth. richie's too full to do anything but flip him off, and stan just smiles evenly back.

“now that r-richie's finally done eating—”

“was the extra stack of pancakes really necessary?” bev chimed in. “you didn't even finish them.” richie reaches out to grab the last piece of pancakes with no regard for the sticky dribbles he leaves across the table (and his shirt) as he pops it into his mouth.

“everything i do is absolutely necessary, my dear lady,” he teases, british accent half-assed in his pancake coma, and goes to wipe his fingers on her shirt. her fingers tighten around his wrist before he can get within an inch of her, though, and richie's squeal of “*uncle! uncle!*” leaves her with a look of satisfaction.

stan mutters out a “play nice, kids,” but bill clears his throat obnoxiously and they all finally look at him.

“now that richie’s done eating, w-we have important things to discuss.” bill looks at them all very seriously, and when richie starts to laugh, bev pinches his thigh under the table so hard he almost chokes.

“aren’t we waiting for mike for this?” stan asks.

mike was supposed to join them over an hour ago, but ten minutes past the rest of the losers arriving at the diner, bill’s phone had buzzed with a text.

mike (11:39am) to BILL

I’ll be late. Picking up a gift.

they’d all planned to meet up for brunch anyways, something that’d been in the books long before bill and richie had their ‘holy-fuck-what-if-we’ moment a few weeks ago.

after high-school, most of the gang had gone off to different places: richie had been accepted into berkeley with a full ride, but after a semester and a half of professors telling him how to be creative, he’d split. richie took the first flight to italy he could book and proceeded to spend a little over two years traveling europe, returning home with a mess of curls down to his shoulders, a (somehow) worse sense of fashion, and a newfound acceptance of his sexuality.

“there are so many nude beaches in europe. so... so many.” he’d said to bill, eyes dazed, and that had been the end of the conversation.

bev, ben, and stan all went off to college, though their studies couldn’t have been more different. bev, always with an eye for fashion, had just completed her fashion/textile design double major at FIT. richie and bill had flown out for the graduation ceremony, and bev had outright refused to acknowledge richie’s existence because he’d shown up in plaid pants and a polka dot shirt just to spite her. stan had gone to the opposite coast and come back with a tan, a degree in religion and gender studies, and a seething hatred for

the american college education system.

ben had just up and moved to vermont to pursue a degree in business, and along the way had gotten rid of nearly all of his technology, save for a landline, to become a true mountain man. since then he hadn't been back to derry at all; the only contact any of the losers had with him was over his phone, and even then, coordinating calls against busy schedules was too difficult most of the time. richie, who'd been without a phone most of his excursions in europe, couldn't even remember the last time he'd heard ben's voice.

bill had stayed in derry. the scholarships just hadn't come through enough to justify going off to another town, especially when the graphic design program at derry community college was decently acclaimed. plus, derry was where georgie was, and what kind of brother would he have been if he'd let georgie go through high school alone? so he'd moved into a tiny apartment and gotten a job at staples and paid off his loans without a cent of help from his parents. mike had stayed too: after his dad had passed, his mom had needed all the help she could get with the farm, and mike had been happy to stay. "besides," he'd said to bill after graduation. "i like it here. my family's here, mr. chips is here. *you're* here." bill ended up spending a lot of time at mike's farm doing his drawing assignments and watching mike plow fields in sleeveless tanks. it wasn't the worst way to spend his time.

now, though, school was finished, and one by one the losers (except for ben, who no one had heard from in three months) trickled back to derry - back home.

"w-we can catch mike up later," bill decides. he doesn't have any doubts that they'll still all be hanging out by the time mike did show up, and while richie has enough stories about how horny european milfs were for him to last a lifetime, bill's desperate for a subject change. "b-but richie and i have a pro-proposal." bill looks at richie, and then stan looks at richie, and then bev looks at richie, but richie's too absorbed in licking the syrup off his fingers to notice.

"earth to trashmouth," bev teases, and she's halfway to giving him another good thigh pinch when the bells above the diner door jingle and they all turn to see who's arrived.

mike walks in first, looking as unfairly handsome as he always had, and bill knows he just saw mike yesterday but the smile that breaks over his face almost hurts. if stan were paying any attention, he might raise an eyebrow or give that judgy look he'd perfected when they were ten, but, thankfully, none of them can take their eyes off the man who followed in hanlon's steps.

ben hanscom looks... really fucking hot. like, he'd always been cute, there was no doubt about that. right before high school he'd hit a growth spurt that settled a lot of his weight in new places, though he'd never lost that overall softness he'd carried with him since grade school. and he's still soft now; the fabric of his shirt stretches over his stomach and bill, frankly, cannot understand how those jeans were holding in all that ass. ben looks stronger - like he spent all his time chopping wood and chasing down bears, or something. if he were richie, bill might say he looked 'thicker than a bowl of oatmeal.' blessedly, he is not richie. bill sits there, mouth agape, until richie breaks the silence.

"holy fucking ballsack," richie gasps, and no one scolds him for it because they're all kind of thinking it. "jesus ben, you— you're fucking hot!"

ben has the modesty to blush. maybe it'd been four years, and maybe he's now a lumberjack's wet dream, but he would always be good ol' ben hanscom. "hello to you too, richie."

everyone was still staring in awe, but after a moment, mike just throws up his hands and jokingly says "aw, thanks guys i missed you, too! " everyone finally laughs, the moment broken, and they all get up to give out hugs to the new arrivals before squeezing back into the booth: bill, then mike, then stan on one side, and richie, then bev, then ben on the other.

it was another twenty minutes of catching up and six more your mom jokes from richie before people remembered that there was another reason they were all together.

"so what's this incredible idea you have, bill?" mike asks, and ben's eyebrows furrow.

“am i missing something?”

right. ben wasn't in the groupchat, so he hadn't received bill's near illegible text that had gone directly to a group chat none of them had messaged in months. there'd been a lot of emojis and a lot of exclamation points and, really, it was better that ben didn't see it.

“well actually, ri-richie was the one who really came up with it.”
richie pffts.

“all i did was get you stoned.”

“that explains the snapchats,” bev grins, and mike raises an eyebrow.

“snapchats?” he asks, and ben looks confused too.

bill puts his face in his hands. stan, that fucker, happily explains. “we all got lovely videos of bill and richie singing a crude rendition of drunk in love. shoddy camera work overall, but the song wasn't bad.”

“and i didn't know bill could even play guitar,” bev chimes in.

“ *drunk as fuck!* ” richie croons, holding his chest. “we be all night, drunk as f—” bev's hand smacks over richie's mouth, which just incites a short-lived slap-fight, and bill sighs. mike just smiles.

“sorry i missed it.”

bill looks away because he can't look at mike for too long without feeling... things, and the last thing he needs is more texts from stan asking if he's finally told mike he's ass-deep in love with him.

“the p-point is,” bill says. “that's not the f-first thing richie and i have wr-written together.”

“we've also written a romantic screenplay about the intricacies of milf-culture—”

“beep-beep, richie,” all four of them say in unison, and god, bill has never been so happy to have everyone back in the same place.

“we started writing songs a few we-weeks ago. after that night. actually i—” bill pulls out his phone and scrolls through his notes app, showing them all the fifty or so songs he’d kept. some were half-finished, and some were just lyrics or chord progressions that had popped into his head and refused to go away. “i’ve been wr-writing for a co-couple years now. richie just got me hi-igh enough to show them to people.”

“i am awfully good at what i do,” richie says, and tips his invisible hat.

“okay, so you write songs together. how very beautifully gay of you,” stan draws, moving his legs out of the way before bev’s kick can nail him in the shin. “is this your album dropping party?”

“no stan,” richie says with wide eyes, taking stan’s hand against his will. “it’s *our* album dropping party.” stan tugs his hand away and richie blows him a kiss.

“what richie’s trying to say is that we think we should start a band.” bill barrels through the sentence, refusing to be cut off and drawn off-subject again. the table looks at him, blinking, and richie gives him a little apologetic thumbs up.

“a band?” mike asks, and bill nods.

“we-well, when we graduated, i had a lot of free time, so i tried out the derry b-bowling league. and then richie told me that was st-st-that it was *lame* , so i quit and p-picked up guitar.” it had been arduous for so long; youtube videos made it seem so easy, but after two months with seemingly no progress, bill had almost quit outright. slowly, though, he made headway, and after four years of daily practice, bill was actually proud of himself.

(he had also not quit the bowling league. that was a secret between him, mike, and the gutter gang.)

“stan plays piano at t-temple. or used to, at least. and bev and ri-richie both pla-ayed in the percussion section of the paul bu-bu-bunyan marching band.” the combination had nearly killed their band director; the amount of dick jokes richie could make with a set

of mallets was fucking limitless. “and, you know, mike’s pl-played bass since middle school, so.” bill shrugs, a faux nonchalance in the gesture, but he’s been so obsessed with this idea since richie had planted it in his head that he’d started dreaming about it. “so we should start a band.”

everyone’s gone quiet listening to bill, and he’s worried they’re all about to turn him down with a ‘that’s stupid, i’m going home, thanks for brunch!’ but then bev starts nodding, and mike’s got that smile on, and even stan looks like he’s considering it.

“well. bev’s clearly the superior drummer, so what’s richie gonna’ do?” stan asks dryly. “stand on stage and look annoying?”

“i *was* going to be the pretty one, but since ben’s here now, i guess i’ll have to settle for tamborine-ist.”

“at least you can actually play instruments,” ben says, and he looks a little put out. “i don’t even know why i’m here.” bev puts a hand on his arm, and ben’s new beard doesn’t do a very good job of covering the full-face blush. even four years after they’d split, ben couldn’t help the way he looked at beverly marsh. “other than to see you guys, of course.” childhood crushes died hard.

“it’s never too late to pick up keytar,” richie jokes, and they all laugh, but bill lights up with an idea.

“a manager! we need a m-manager!” ben *did* just go to business school for four years— who better than him?

“you don’t even have a name yet, bill, what do you need a manager for?”

“we do have a name,” richie argues. “it’s richie tozier and the sexbots.”

“i was hoping for something more hip,” bev says, chewing at her straw. “like the bevs.”

stan shuts them down. “no and no. if i’m joining a band with you idiots we’re at least going to have a good name. like— like—”

“like milf machine?”

“will you shut *up* about milfs, richie!” and then richie and bev and stan are going around in circles about what constitutes a good band name, and ben watches on, fully entertained.

“what did you want the name to be, bill?” mike’s voice is soft, but they’re squished close enough in the booth that bill can hear him over richie’s boisterous laugh.

“it s-sounds kind of stupid,” bill starts, pulling up a photo of the design he’d finished last night. “but it’s the whole reason this idea even got started, so i th-think it makes sense.” the design is simple, but bright: big chunky letters spelling out the band’s name in magenta and teal and neon yellow. in the center, below the a, there’s a cutout of a shark fin — bill was really proud of that part.

“shark puppy?” mike’s still looking at the phone, and bill’s about to say something along the lines of *nevermind, it’s stupid, pretend i never said anything* , when mike’s face splits into a smile.

“that’s a killer band name,” mike says encouragingly, and bill’s chest lets out in relief, pun going completely over his head. “and the logo’s sick, too.”

bev’s hand reaches over the mountains of dishes to swipe bill’s phone, and the rest of the table studies the image.

“yeah, i like shark puppy,” ben says.

“i could definitely fuck with shark puppy,” bev says.

“it’s better than milf machine,” stan says.

“it was my idea,” richie says. and it was, but bill still smiles when bev sweetly tells him to shut the fuck up and gives bill his phone back.

“s-so what do you guys say?” bill looks at them all with hopeful, questioning eyes. hesitantly, he puts a hand out into the middle. “want to start a b-band?”

richie’s hand joins bill’s immediately, because *duh* . “i didn’t write

half those songs for nothin’.”

bev’s in almost as fast, stacking her hand on top of richie’s. “i will absolutely be your sexy lady drummer.” bill’s heart lifts.

“you know i’m in,” mike agrees, and his hand’s sitting on top of bev’s but bill swears he can feel the heat from it all the way at the bottom of the stack.

“me too,” ben agrees, his large hand dwarfing the rest of theirs. “even if i don’t know shit about being a manager.”

and then it’s just stan. everyone turns their gaze to him.

“whaddya’ say, stan the man? it’s not like you have anything better to do.” richie raises his eyebrows, and after a moment, stan’s flat look turns into an eye roll.

“oh, sure. it’s not like i just finished a four year degree in gender studies. who needs jobs anymore, right? why don’t i just run off with my childhood friends and start a band?” despite the exasperation, stan’s hand joins theirs, topping off the stack delicately.

“to fuckin’ shark puppy, baby!” richie grins, and as they all throw their hands up with an echo of ‘to shark puppy!’, bill thinks his heart might explode.

this was going to be fucking *awesome* .

they sound fucking awful.

it’s been four years since bev’s even *touched* a drumstick, so she’s horribly out of practice, and it shows. stan only knows how to play traditional jewish songs, which is, you know, *great* , but bill’s going to lose it if he has to hear dance with me/glory come down one more fucking time. richie keeps dickin’ around with his stupid tambourine, trying to sing foul lyrics over the mess of sound they’re creating, and

at one point ben had to physically restrain stan from putting his fist directly through the tambourine and into richie's face.

"i'm losing it tozier, i'm fucking losing it!"

ben had started the process a loyal cheerleader: he sat on the couch in richie's parents' basement (renamed 'shark puppy hq') and clapped whenever he deemed it appropriate. then he started wearing headphones. eventually he'd stopped showing up at all, deciding instead that researching how to be a band manager at the library was a better use of his time.

the only one who seemed to be on the same page as bill was mike.

"i d-don't get it," bill says one day. he's leaned up against the sun-warmed barn, sketchbook in hand though the page is still blank. mike's installing a new fence today, and bill had promised to keep him company— i.e he's sat there and stared as mike got sweatier and sweatier after each fence post. "we've all been wo-wo-wo- practicing on our own. we should be b-better by now. but we still suck."

mike kicks his foot down against the shovel do push it deeper into the ground before scooping it out and flinging it to the side. "we do not suck. we're just, you know—"

"bad." bill finishes. mike evens him with a frown. okay, objectively they weren't bad. bev's spent most of her time going back to basics; when they're not at band rehearsal, bill sees her beating out her rudiments with whatever's within reach, or just tapping out the beats with her fingers. despite stan's initial disinclination to play anything but the haunting chords of worship songs, bill had come to practice early and heard his fingers dancing across the keys to a complicated version of britney spears' *toxic* , so the skill was still there. clearly they had the talent, but they were missing something.

"we are not *bad* , and you know that."

"then wh-why isn't it working?" mike must hear something in bill's tone that gives him pause because he drops the shovel to turn and face him completely. there's dirt and grass all over his jeans and shirt (and, bill delights, a streak of mud across his forehead where he'd

wiped the sweat away earlier) but mike looks completely in his element. he looks calm, and that's already enough to make bill feel better. mike joins him against the barn.

"it's been a long time since we were all really together," mike says, and he pauses, but bill doesn't say anything. mike was always particular with his words, and bill had learned to give him time to put it all out there — just as mike had done the same for him. "we're older now, you know? we all got— we all grew up." bill looks at him, and mike rephrases. "okay, most of us grew up. regardless, we grew. we're all just... different now." mike looks down at his jeans, searching for words again. "it's not a bad thing. i think we just have to uh. find our new groove, you know?"

bill taps his pencil against the pad on his lap. mike's right, and bill knows it. still, it's not a solution, just an explanation. "but h-how do we do that?"

mike shrugs. "all the songs we've been trying have been the ones you and richie wrote, right?"

"y-yeah."

"maybe we should write a new one. all of us. *together* ." bill wants to object, wants to argue that there's nothing wrong with the ones that were already written, but then mike looks over at him with all the warmth of a worn-in sweater and bill knows that, again, mike is right. mike is always right. "it's worth a try, right?"

bill can't help but return mike's smile, his heart filled with hope for shark puppy once again. "r-right."

"h-hey guys, can we— guys— g-guys—" no one's listening. ben's on his phone (a new purchase) attempting to prove that actually, emma watson has two middle names and *neither* of them are babe-a-tron; richie's currently being purple-nurpled by bev after he'd gone a little

too ham on the tambo a little too close to her ear, and stan's holding him down. even mike looks a little worse for wear, like the antics are finally getting to him too. "c-could we please—"

"SHUT UP." everyone freezes. richie lets out a pained squeak and bev's hands quickly drop away. mike, who'd just stopped the chaos in a single breath, looks incredibly calm as he nods at bill. "take it away, denbrough."

bill clears his throat. "r-right. okay. i think we're going to tr-try something different today."

"so you've finally come around to the orgy idea?" richie grins. bill moves on.

"i th-think we need to find our groove and richie, i sw-swear to god, if you make any kuzco jokes i'm having ben for-rcibly remove you from this basement." richie closes his mouth, but bill still hears the 'it's *my* basement' under his breath. "we should write something together instead of just putting me and richie's songs through the wash."

"your songs are good, though, bill. especially 'georgie'." bev's look is earnest, and bill wasn't fishing for compliments but he flushes anyways.

"th-thanks bev, but. they're not *ours* ." and bill's not throwing out his and richie's songs, just tabling them. if shark puppy could never find their balance, their core, then shark puppy would cease to be. "c'mon. let's just t-try it."

so everyone takes their place: bev nervously twirling her sticks behind the drumset; stan, cracking his knuckles over the keyboard; mike on an old milk crate cradling his bass; bill, too restless to sit, bouncing on his heels with his guitar strap secured; and richie splayed out on the carpet in the middle of all of them. ben's stands there, looking a bit lost.

"uh, should i go? i can—"

"no," bill says firmly. "we all have to be here."

richie pats the ground beside him and ben shrugs, joining him. richie hands over the tambourine, which ben takes hesitantly, and richie slides a shaker egg out of his pocket.

“awlrigh, good sir. what now?” richie’s looking up at him expectantly, and then bill realizes that they *all* are.

bill takes a deep breath.

“juh-just come in at your own pace,” he says, and then he plays. it’s a simple chord progression, one that had snuck into his head as mike hammered fence posts into the soil, and when he gets to the end, he plays it again. and again. and again, until mike’s toe tapping switches to a soft bassline— a gentle undercurrent that frames bill’s finger-plucking in a way he could never have come up with himself. the encouraging smile that comes with it is almost too much. luckily, bev’s jumping in, and bill lets himself be pulled back into the song. bev is all bass drum and mid-tom, an easy beat, and then richie’s egg shaker starts up too, and bill doesn’t even try to stop the way his head starts bobbing with excitement.

stan’s still standing there, fingers hovering over the keys like he doesn’t know what to do, and bill wants to say something— *tell him it’s okay, we’re not your father, you don’t have to worry about making mistakes in front of us* . and then, with shaking hands, stan plays. there’s a few missed keys, a couple wrong notes, but stan’s wearing that determined scowl and, eventually, he finds his rhythm. a counter-melody, hooking around what bill has played and pushing it, pulling it, taking it from a little chord progression to a dance.

holy fuck, bill wants to say. *we’re doing it, we’re actually doing it*. there’s something fragile here, though, something delicately beautiful, and bill doesn’t want to interrupt. even ben is with them, eyes closed and tambourine sitting ignored in his lap, but bill thinks he can hear him humming.

so bill closes his eyes, too, and he sings.

there’d always been a hesitancy in bill to speak up. when he couldn’t even get through a full sentence without stuttering over all his words, what was the point? who was going to listen to stuttering bill

denbrough? silenced by his own traitorous voice, he'd never even bothered to try to sing — just mouthed along with the words to whatever richie would put on during their after-school study sessions. imagine his (and everyone else's) surprise when, drunk for the first time at prom, he'd belted out an entire taylor swift song in the middle of the dance floor without a single hiccup in his voice. apparently singing used a different part of the brain. who knew?

easy come, easy go

alongside you i learn to float

dirty nails and cardboard sails

a brand new feeling i've always known

endless day, forever moon,

i first knew love in my twelfth june

we pinky swear we won't forget

sleeping by the quarry and lazy afternoons

there's this indescribable thing in the room now: it's palpable, like if bill stopped playing he could reach out and grab it. when he opens his eyes, he knows it's not just him that feels it. there's this look on everyone's face like they know they're not just writing their first song anymore; they're writing a whole new chapter for themselves.

take my hand and cut me deep

a blood oath that i'm yours to keep

my grip is tight as we watch the sun

and six hearts decide to beat as one

the last line is a little strained, doesn't quite fit in the rhythm that

they beat out — like it's missing a syllable or something. actually, the whole thing could use some work, but bill will figure it out later because

“holy SHIT!” richie bellows. “shark puppy FUCKS!” the room erupts into cheers after that; even stan looks incredulously accomplished, like he didn't know they had it in themselves. bill feels— bill doesn't know how he feels. a little shocked that it had sounded that good first try, maybe. a little scared it won't happen again. when he locks eyes with mike as richie dances around the room with his arms around a giggling ben, he decides he feels like he's finally home.

things start to come together pretty quickly after that. it's like they had all the pieces before, but now they understand where to put them. in desperate need of a repertoire for whatever the future holds, they write a couple more songs with that system (though after richie repeatedly abuses his privilege during his turns at lyrical improv, they swiftly end the group-writing method). they take a couple of bill and richie's and do some rewrites, styling them more to fit the 'shark puppy groove', and after a few weeks stan comes to them with a heart-wrenching piano ballad that they all decide needs to be on the set list.

“ *i'm on my knees at the altar of you* ? damn, stanley, if your degree didn't prove your boner for jesus, this sure does.”

“i will literally end your life, richard.”

eventually, bill has to quit his job at staples, which is the easiest thing he's ever done, and then a few weeks later he has to quit the gutter gang, which is the hardest. the boys give him a monogrammed polo as a goodbye present, and bill does *not* cry. ben keeps the shifts he started picking up at the lumber yard, and mike still works on his family's farm, but they're both working less hours, and mike's pants stop accumulating grass and manure stains from his increased time in richie's basement. bev moved the few things she'd left at her aunt's

during college into bill's apartment and became his official housemate, and stan moved his book collection there and became the unofficial third. (he slept at his parents' house but spent most of his time on bill's couch waxing poetic about foucault and telling bill he needed to be a big boy and express his obvious feelings to mike.)

richie did... whatever richie did. after stan told him he looked like a dirty hippy, richie let bev give him a haircut, but he also went out and bought an old, beat up van with the explicit purpose of renovating it into a 'mobile sex pad', so it evened out.

all of ben's time at the library paid off — which was in no way surprising, seeing as how he'd been making Derry Public Library his bitch since he'd stepped through the doors however many years ago. in late september, after weeks of practice and fucking around, weeks of songwriting and drunken piano lessons from stan, weeks of open mic nights and bars in the surrounding towns, after a few shaky videos posted to facebook under the name shark puppy official, ben comes to them with an offer.

"*the blue parrot*? is th-that a club?" bill's nose wrinkles. the name is vaguely familiar, but he can't place it.

"it is," bev confirms. she eyes ben conspiratorially, who is studying his hands and refusing to look up. actually, all of them look like they know exactly what the blue parrot is — even mike — and they're all smiling to themselves like bill's missing out on some private joke. bill shrugs.

"we-well c'mon! it's our first big gig! be-bev, please don't let richie choose his own clothes for this." richie gives an affronted ' *hey!* ' but doesn't put up much of an argument past that because he knows bill's right.

the blue parrot turns out to be a very well known queer club in portland (like, how did ben book this as their first big gig kind of well-known). after a three hour drive in richie's renovated van, bill stepped out to see a giant flashing neon rainbow in the window and said *oh* .

"i've been doing my research," ben explains, "and if we get the, uh,

LGBT+ community in our fan base, we've already won half the battle."

"m-makes sense," bill says weakly. it does, even beyond the business element of it all. bev, richie, and mike had all been openly bi for a few years, and stan chose not to label himself but he'd also dated no less than three men in college. bill had known about himself since middle school when he'd first heard prince, but he felt like he was sitting in the same boat as stan and never made a point of coming out. ben was the only mystery of the group, having dated bev and then fallen off the face of the earth for four years, but his phone background was still emma watson so bill could make guesses.

"billy boy's first gay club and he doesn't even get to be drunk for it," richie teases, an arm hooking around bill's shoulders. "don't worry, next time i'll get you out on the dance floor and show you how it's done— tozier style."

"c'mon idiots, we've got a show to play." bev gives them both a playful shove, and ben calls for them to help unpack the van, and then bill gets too swept into *holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck* to think about anything but not vomiting on stage.

it's a decently sized venue, big enough that there's a green room they all file into to wait out the last half hour before show time. sitting there scrolling through facebook does nothing to help bill's stage fright, but after bev and stan force a dirty shirley into his hand he feels a little better. *loosen up*, bev had said as she handed him the drink, but she'd looked nervous too.

ben, who would normally be calming everyone down, hadn't stopped wringing his hands and checking his phone since they'd arrived. bill chose to ignore that and down the rest of his drink instead.

"five minutes," a little brunette with a headset — andrea, she'd said — called into the room before skittering out again. thalia boyfriend, the drag queen who hosted almost every event, was out on stage now doing a performance to madonna's like a prayer and god, how were they ever going to follow that? even through the walls, bill can hear the screams and cheers. he desperately wants another drink. the couch sinks beside him.

“earth to denbrough,” comes mike’s voice, shaking bill from his reverie. “you okay?”

“yuh-yuh-yuh- no.” he didn’t know why he even tried to lie; mike could clearly see his shaking hands.

“it’s just another show, right? we’ve done this before.”

“so-something tells me this one’s different,” bill says. “i can fuh-feel it.”

mike doesn’t try to disagree. maybe he feels it too. “the place is different, yeah. different faces in the crowd, different stage under our feet.” a warm hand settles on bill’s knee, and bill looks up to see mike’s big eyes shining at him. “but it’s still us out there. we’re shark puppy, bill!” that gets an encouraging whoop from richie across the room. “there’s no reason to be nervous. not with us out there with you.”

bill feels something bubble up in his chest, wants to say *thank you* and *you’re right* and *i love you* and *i always will* . instead he smiles, small, genuine, and nods as he stands.

“we’re fucking sh-shark puppy.”

“hell yeah we are!” bev joins, slinging her arm around bill’s waist. then richie’s there, pulling stan in with him, and ben, and mike, and they’re all standing there holding each other while shouting *shark puppy shark puppy shark puppy* when andrea comes back in to send them to the stage.

it had been richie’s idea to start the show in the dark. it was dramatic, and fun, and even though stan had tripped the first few times getting to the keyboard, they’d switched to glow-tape to hold the wires down and eventually gotten used to it. bill stood there now, his nervous stomach thankful that he couldn’t see the faces in the crowd, and waited for bev’s sticks to come together and start the show with ‘rock fight’. and waited. and waited. just as he was preparing to deal with the fact their first big show was starting with a technical difficulty, a single synth note rang out in the club.

“shark pup-py, ooh ha ha.” richie’s voice was a whisper into the mic, and bill was thankful no one could see the confusion plastered over his face. stan hit another note. “shark pup-py, ooh ha ha.”

what the fuck was happening? another note rang out, and now bev’s voice was joining richie’s. “shark pup-py, ooh ha ha.”

a ripple of hushed excitement went through the crowd, and when stan’s voice joined in, so did some of the audience. “shark pup-py, ooh ha ha.”

bill didn’t know what was happening, but as the chant got louder, and faster, as he heard mike’s hearty voice join in with the rest of them, he knew that this is what all their shows before had been missing. bill would’ve joined in too, but he was too busy trying to keep his smile from splitting his face in half.

the synth fell out but the chant kept going until the entire club was shaking with it: shark pup-py ooh ha ha, shark pup-py ooh ha ha, shark pup-py ooh ha ha—

then, finally, the lights flicked, and bill only had half a second to put his hands on his guitar before bev was screaming “WE ARE SHARK PUPPY! 1 - 2 - 3 - 4!” and the beginning of ‘rock fight’ filled the room.

the show passed in a blur of lights, cheers, and richie dancing around the stage with his tambourine when it was bill’s turn at the mic. all bill can fully remember is the way he felt when he’d looked out into the crowd and saw no less than three people singing along as he sat down to play ‘georgie’. people knew their songs. people knew shark puppy. people came to their show and sang along to songs they had written, and bill got to see it all from under the hot stage lights. they’d even been cheered back on-stage for an *encore*. it was, frankly, the coolest fucking shit in the world.

it was over too fast, richie screaming out a ‘*GOODNIGHT MILFS OF PORTLAND!*’ into the mic before they all run off-stage into ben’s open arms.

“be-best show ever,” bill marvelled, breathless. “where the fu-uck did

that chant come from?”

“we planned it when you went pee for the sixth time before the show,” stan says, and he doesn’t look all that apologetic when he adds “sorry.”

“n-no, it was perfect. it’s our thing! we ha-ave a thing!” bill doesn’t even know if he’s making sense, and he’s too high on the endorphins of *absolutely killing it* to care.

“bill, you’ve always had a thing. i can’t believe it’s taken you 22 years to notice your own—”

“excuse me, which of you is ben hanscom?”

as a unit, the group separates from their huddle. ben adjusts his collar.

“that’s — i am,” ben says to the stranger. “are you—”

“colleen dupree, yes.” the woman smiles, extending her hand for ben to shake. “that was quite a performance out there. i’m impressed.”

bill was... very confused. whoever this colleen person was looked incredibly out of place with the general vibe of the blue parrot: her cream pantsuit was impeccably pressed and bill was pretty sure the diamond encrusted watch on her wrist was, like, real. a quick glance to his friends confirmed their uncertainty, too. except ben, who just looked adorably flustered.

“thanks, babe,” richie pipes up, far too comfortable with strangers. “if you liked that performance, wait until you see the one i put on in your bed.”

bev groans and bill holds his breath, but colleen, against all odds, laughs. “i’m not sure my wife would appreciate that, but thank you for the offer.” she looks over the group of them, head tilting. “mr. hanscom didn’t tell you i was coming, did he?”

ben looks a little ashamed when the band shakes their heads. “i didn’t want to make you guys more nervous than you already were.” colleen pulls out a business card from the front pocket of her jacket,

and suddenly bill is very, very, very grateful for the thoughtfulness of ben.

“a r-r-recor- record la-la-” bill doesn’t even try to finish. his tongue is practically vibrating.

“i’m from duma key records, yes. mr. hanscom contacted me a few weeks ago, and we agreed i’d come out to the show and see if there was anything worth watching.”

stan, of all people, speaks up first. “was there?”

colleen, a true executive, lets them squirm. bill thinks he might be losing circulation in his fingers because his fists are squeezed so tight.

“i’ll have to make some calls,” she says finally. “and punch some numbers. but i would have to be an absolute moron to pass up the opportunity to get shark puppy in our studios.”

it feels like a punch to the stomach in the best way possible. even richie is knocked speechless. colleen puts her hands on her hips, looking amused.

“what do you say? do we have a deal?”

september, 2017

- chicago, illinois

... the band, originating from the small town of derry, maine, blew up seemingly overnight. three months after signing with duma key records, shark puppy put out it’s debut album ‘losers’ to the delight

of fans and reviewers alike. richie tozier, lead singer and self-proclaimed tambourimbo, accredits most of their success to bill denbrough (*guitar, vocals, lyrics*).

“without bill getting whisked out of his mind and deciding to start this band, we wouldn’t be here right now,” says tozier, who had to dodge no less than three attempted hits from the other band members to finish that sentence. denbrough disagrees, claiming their success comes from all of them, equally.

the band is clearly close, showing a deep-connection that beverly marsh (*drums, back-up vocals*) says has spanned over ten years. “except for the two months stan didn’t talk to richie after he snapped stan’s nintendo d.s in half.” uris (*keyboard*) had no comment, but shot tozier a particularly dirty look.

in reality, shark puppy’s sudden success must come from a conglomerate of reasons, though one stands out from the rest: their music. after only one album, shark puppy has managed to display an incredible range of emotion, style, and talent in their content. after achieving an honorable 8.8 on pitchfork, tickets for their first tour have been flying off the metaphorical shelves. only two of the top music critics have had anything negative to say about ‘losers’, and both have had difficulties with the onslaught of flaming comments from dedicated fans...

“hey, kid.” patty blum’s voice breaks through the wall of text. “new assignment. conference room, chop chop.”

“you got it,” the man says as she walks away, but he makes no move to get up.

....pitchfork critic j.p. grazer has taken most of the hits after his scathing review entitled '*shark puppy sinks when striving to swim*'....

“kaspbrak! move that cute little ass!”

eddie sighs, closes the tab, and tries not to think about the online shit-storm waiting for him on twitter. it could wait: he had work to do.

2. eddie

Summary for the Chapter:

the beginning isn't always the same. sometimes he's nine, sometimes he's twelve - never much older than that. sometimes he's wearing his favorite old red shorts, sometimes he's wearing the crisp white polo he wore to church. sometimes he's in the hallways of his elementary school, sometimes he's in the long corridors of his nana's house, and sometimes he doesn't know where he is at all.

he is always running. and he is never fast enough.

'*eddie*,' she calls. she's right behind him, she's lightyears away. '*eddie-bear*.' sickly-sweet, crawling across his skin like the spiders in the basement.

'*don't run from mommy*,' she'd whisper. even when eddie would cover his ears, she was there, inside of him: a part of him he couldn't cut away. '*eddie, come home. come home to mommy*.'

sometimes, dream eddie would find his voice. *no*, he'd say, or *stop*, or *please*, or *i'm trying my best i promise, i promise*.

'*eddie*,' the voice morphs, and sometimes — every time — *eddie weeps*. '*your best just isn't good enough*.'

Notes for the Chapter:

chapter warning for some vague mentions of child abuse and discussion of death.

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may, 2016

- chicago, illinois

' *eddie. eddie. eddie*. '

not again, please, not again.

' *eddie. eddie. eddie*. '

eddie tries to scream, but it feels like his mouth is wired shut.

' *eddie. eddie. dude, c'mon*. '

wait, *dude* ? sonia would never—

suddenly, there's a smack across his cheek, and eddie kaspbrak shoots

up with a scream.

“christ, man! what the fuck?”

percy stumbles back with wide eyes, hands held up in surrender. “i’m sorry, i’m sorry!”

“what the— why the hell did you slap me?”

“your alarm’s been going off for, like, fifteen minutes.”

awake for less than forty-five seconds, eddie wants to go back to sleep. “so you *slapped* me?!”

“i called your name, like, a billion times.” percy drops his gaze, avoiding eye contact. “and you, uh, wouldn’t stop mumblin’ shit about your—”

“yeah, *okayokayokay* , i got it, i got it.” eddie’s not sure how he’d gone this long without his roommate catching him in a nightmare, but he’s thankful. he also does *not* need to re-live whatever embarrassing things he’d been saying. eddie rubs a hand over his face, forcing the remains of his dream away. percy’s still staring at him. “what?”

“are you gonna turn that off?”

right. normally, eddie’s alarm woke him within the first few rings — if he wasn’t already awake before it went off. unless it was a weekend, of course, when only the grumbling of his stomach could pull him from his blankets. eddie clicks off the old-fashioned style clock next to his bed, putting an end to the incessant chirping, and he and percy both visibly relax. there’s nothing more irritating to a human psyche (or eardrums) than that sound.

eddie’s still caught up in the remains of his nightmare. it’d been a couple months since his last one, spurred on by the emptiness of a dorm’s apartment building abandoned for christmas break. it had been the fourth christmas he’d spent on campus alone, and though he’d told percy he’d be fine, the nightmares that came in his absence proved otherwise. not that eddie would’ve asked percy to stick around: they aren’t friends. roommates from freshman year to senior,

and eddie still can't remember if percy is a crim major or just way too into the tv show *snapped*. the guy's nice, and quiet, and eddie likes rooming with him because he never brings conquests home or eats smelly food or leaves trash on the floor, but they don't hang out. with graduation two weeks away, they probably never will.

the sound of percy's electric weed grinder shakes eddie from his thoughts and he grimaces.

"it's not even eight in the morning."

"it's saturday." percy says something else, too, but eddie's not listening because the anxiety that has been consuming his life for three weeks straight hits him all over again with tidal wave force.

"oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit—" eddie's out of bed like a bat out of hell, heart pumping a rapid fire rhythm as he moves around the room. there is no chance of him being late yet, but that doesn't stop him from racing around the apartment to get ready as percy sits on, rolling a joint and watching with a sort of disconnected bemusement.

"oh shit oh shit oh shit," as he stumbles out of the shower in a cloud of coconut-scented steam, wet feet slipping across the tile in his hurry.

"oh shit oh shit oh shit," as he puts on outfit number one, then outfit number two, then outfit number three (the soft pink button up and black slacks he'd originally laid out last night - sometimes he has to go through the options, okay?).

"oh shit oh shit oh shit," as he grabs his briefcase (a splurge, because being twenty-two meant splurging on fucking *briefcases*) and tears out of the apartment, percy waving goodbye and mumbling a ' *good luck* ' through a mouthful of cocoa puffs.

eddie arrives an hour and twenty-two minutes early. which, actually,

is eight minutes later than he planned. it's still plenty of time for a pre-interview freakout in the parking lot of pitchfork media inc., though, which is what he'd been counting on.

yeah. pitchfork fucking media fucking incorporated.

when eddie's third-grade teacher asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he'd looked up at him with big brown eyes and said *tall* . when mr. sonny laughed, eddie frowned, because he'd been being serious.

"i meant— what kind of job do you want to have, eddie? a fireman? or maybe a doctor?" eddie's nose had crinkled at that. *a doctor* . that's what sonia had told him he should —would — be.

'a healthy doctor to take care of mommy, wouldn't that be nice? everything is clean in hospitals, eddiebear. it's the perfect place for you.'

but mr. sonny hadn't asked what his mom wanted to be, or what he thought he was supposed to be;: mr. sonny had asked eddie what *eddie* wanted to be. no one past the lunch-lady had ever asked him what he wanted before, and eddie... eddie didn't know.

"can i think about it?" eddie had asked, and mr. sonny had nodded. so eddie thought, and he thought, and he thought, and after three weeks of thinking his mother died and he forgot to think anymore.

sonny never got an answer. eddie, windswept in confusion and all those grieving feelings he didn't understand, moved in with his grandmother in illinois before the school year had even ended. the question had stuck with him though, especially once he was out from under sonia's thumb. a new state, a new school, a new guardian to flourish and grow in the care of. did he want to be an artist? a teacher, perhaps, like mr. sonny? a knight, a mathematician, a farmer, a mime, a baker, a candlestick maker...

the possibilities for eddie's magnificent future were endless.

well. kind of. turns out sonia kaspbrak didn't just sprout from the ground fully able to suffocate her son under the guise of love; those traits were learned, and practiced, and sonia's mother was the one

that taught her. moving in with elvira - ‘ *call me nana, eddiebear* ’ - felt like coming home to find his mother hadn’t died after all. if anything, it was worse: elvira was smarter, sharper, and held a much tighter leash than sonia ever had. eddie spent a lot of time in his room - spent a lot of time thinking about his future. eddie spent a lot of time thinking that maybe childhood was a privilege, and the universe had decided that, for whatever reason, he did not deserve it.

for all the bad things that elvira did, she’s still the reason eddie eventually figured out what he wanted to do. in the middle of elvira’s big, rickety-floored living room, there was a piano. it was old, just like everything else in the house, but unlike the couches that smelled like mothballs or the garish rugs, it seemed like the piano was actually cared for. it was always clean, and always in tune, checked monthly by a man by the name of bob sharp (which nana laughed heartily at every time he sat down at the piano to tune it). it was nana’s prized possession, and eddie’s saving grace.

looking back, eddie doesn’t think he actually had a choice in the matter. nana had taken one look at his hands and asked sweetly: “how would you feel about piano lessons, eddiebear? twice a week?” she hadn’t waited for an answer, because it wasn’t really a question. the next sunday after an hour long lesson of smacked hands and shaky scales, eddie finally knew the answer to mr. sonny’s question.

bruised knuckles, no less than two hours of daily practice, calloused fingers, unshed tears, his tutor johaness’ hot, garlicky breath screaming in his ear at every missed note... eddie endured it all for years because he’d finally found love in the sound of music. of course he’d heard music before then — radios fucking existed — but between listening and playing and breathing piano, eddie learned to live in it.

“so i’ve been thinking,” eddie said the summer before his senior year. “i’ve got a list of the top music schools in the country, and i—”

“music school?” elvira interrupted, her ageing hand clasped tightly around her glass of orange juice. “why would you be looking into music school, eddie dear?” she wore a smile, but the tone was one that eddie was all too familiar with.

“i— i thought—” eddie’s brows furrowed. “i know only the very best get into these schools, but johanness told me he thinks i’m talented enough to—”

“oh, don’t listen to johanness. that man hasn’t been in his right mind in thirty years,” nana dismissed, and gave a brief wave of her hand. “you play very nicely in church, dear, but that’s not enough to get you into any kind of fancy school. wouldn’t you rather be something practical? a doctor would be a much more suitable—”

“i’m good, nana,” eddie cut in. elvira’s mouth thinned. “i’m good, and i know i’m good, and johanness may be crazy but i don’t think he’d encourage me to do this if he didn’t absolutely know i could.”

“of course you’re good, eddie,” nana said, smile still glued in place. “but you aren’t good enough. you never will be.” eddie’s gaze dropped to the table. *not good enough not good enough not good enough.* “not for those schools, anyway. now, eat your eggs: they’re getting cold. you can play me a song after breakfast.”

sunday, eddie had gone downstairs for his lesson and found a new teacher sitting at the bench.

so eddie had applied to nursing programs wherever elvira deemed fit: nothing too big, or too close to ‘bad’ neighborhoods, and absolutely nothing more than a six hour drive from her. acceptances rolled in much to nana’s delight, who took to calling him doctor kaspbrak around the house: she even had a quilt custom made for his dorm bed with DR. K emblazoned in big, blue letters. eddie graduated, packed up, and moved out, resigned to a life of never getting to be who he wanted.

two weeks into freshman year, elvira died.

when sonia had passed, eddie had cried. a lot. his mommy was gone, and he was only eight - the implications of what her death truly meant didn’t register until he was old enough to understand that what he’d lived through was abuse. at the time, he’d hidden away that kernel of happiness, hated himself for even thinking that his own mother’s death could be anything less than a tragedy. at eighteen, eddie didn’t think like that anymore. eddie had suffered every year of

his life, nothing more than a puppet in elvira's wrinkled grip. she, like her daughter, had emotionally abused and manipulated him, all the while calling it love. so when eddie got the call that she'd died, he didn't cry, and he refused to let himself feel bad about the relief that unfurled inside of him. eddie didn't owe sonia or elvira anything — especially not his grief.

within a week eddie had changed his major. within two, he thought he might have started to understand what it means to be happy.

“well, mr. kaspbrak, your resume is impeccable, and i can tell from our conversation you'd fit right in here.” patty blum, the woman behind the desk, tosses the stack of eddie's resume back onto the desk. she's got her feet kicked up too, this beautiful carefree energy that had made eddie feel comfortable enough to, like, breathe. “but knowing you made dean's list every semester isn't a good enough reason to hire you.”

eddie, who until this point had been feeling generally optimistic about the outlook of this interview, deflates. not good enough, not good enough, not good enough. whatever, fuck his dreams, right? might as well just throw his credentials in the garbage on the way out, maybe he could pick up an arby's application before heading home, or —

“so why don't you give me a reason that is .”

right. patty stares at him, this edge of challenge in her gaze like she's saying *c'mon, give me something meaty*. there is something eddie's got — a secret he's saved under his tongue for almost four years. something that no one else knows. something meaty. did he want to risk it? eddie's eyes drift over patty's head: trophies and plaques and accolades printed with pitchfork media inc. look back at him.

yeah, fuck it.

“i’m j.p grazer,” eddie says on an exhale, and patty looks momentarily like she’s choking.

“you’re j.p grazer.” the disbelief reads all over her tone and face, any pretense of cool and collected gone. “don’t take this the wrong way, but i thought you’d be—”

“older?” he guesses.

“taller.”

eddie huffs. “i’m an *anonymous* music critic, what would make you think i’d be tall?”

patty, apparently over the initial shock now, grins. “you write like a tall guy. i don’t know. holy shit though, really? i’m gonna have to get the boss in here.”

eddie’s face pinches with confusion. “wait, what? you mean you’re not the boss?”

“nah, i’m still an intern.” patty’s legs swing off the desk. “mr. sting doesn’t like bothering with these interviews, so he has us screen people and give him the spark notes.”

“kind of a dick thing to do, isn’t it?” the words were out of his mouth faster than he could remember this was a *literal job interview* and maybe he shouldn’t be dissing *the literal boss*. lucky for him, patty just looks quietly charmed.

“i’ll make sure to leave that out of the spark notes, j.p.”

j.p grazer, music critic, had started as a hobby. the few friends he had in school only ever wanted to talk about whatever was on the radio (if they wanted to talk music at all) and the few friends he had from church only ever wanted to talk about jesus (and sex). with a lot of opinions and no one to talk to but his teddy bear, eddie did what any

sane teen with internet access would do and started a blog.

at first it was a lot of witty bitching about his grandmother's choice in classical music (such posts have long been deleted), but eddie quickly learned to take out the personal details in his reviews (and to change his name). at first, it was just a place to put his thoughts about what he listened to; there was an endless amount of albums or pieces that eddie could endlessly talk about, and on the internet, there was endless space to do so. at first, that's all it was. at first.

but then people started reading his work, and agreeing with it too. then they started sharing it. eddie remembers (and will never talk about) the night he cried because someone had written back to him, discussing how right they thought eddie was and how perfect an analysis it was. he'd just— he'd never felt so seen before. to talk, and to be listened to in return... it was an addictive feeling.

over four years j.p grazer became one of the most well known music critics in the blogging world. his reviews were snappy and clever and well-written, but what the readers loved was the honesty. at times, eddie would be brutal. look, some music was just bad, okay? not every album was a winner. if the lyrics sucked, or the melody was bland, eddie was going to mention it. the other side of the coin, though, was that if eddie said a song was good? it was good. to be praised by j.p grazer was an honor.

a fucking *honor* .

(how fucking cool was that?)

eddie posted on that blog from the summer before his senior year all the way to the summer after he graduated from college with his degrees in music and journalism. until eddie applied for a (paid!) internship at a *hugegiantmassive* company. until j.p grazer's reviews, in 2016, began being posted on pitchfork's official site instead.

september 2017

- chicago, illinois

“as we all know, shark puppy is the fastest rising band on the charts right now.”

eddie shrinks in his chair. oh, so it was going to be *this* kind of meeting. mr. sting goes on.

“as we all know, very own pitchfork writer j.p grazer posted a particularly brutal— ”

“honest—”

“particularly *stupid* article about shark puppy, aforementioned fastest rising band on the charts.” eddie shields his eyes, thankful it’s only the two of them and patty in the room. it had been a little stupid, but eddie wasn’t going to be extra nice about an album just because the band has great chemistry. *maybe if they’d put that kind of chemistry into their lyrics*, eddie had written, *they’d have scored a little higher—but not by much*.

yeah. brutal.

“okay, so the kid made a mistake,” patty starts, and eddie hates that she calls him kid because she’s only eleven months older. “what’re we gonna do about it? solutions, not blame.” eddie suddenly doesn’t care at all that patty calls him kid. patty is a wonderful, wonderful woman.

“lucky for us, the band’s manager has already reached out with an offer that benefits everyone.” mr. sting leans over the table, his ugly, beefy hands gripping the edge. “and you are going to take it.”

eddie knows that tone. that was the ‘you’re going to listen to me or there’s going to be Big Consequences’ tone. the ‘you do this or you’re fired’ tone. eddie crosses his arms.

“what is it?” eddie thinks he sees mr. sting seriously, legitimately

snarl. ugh. mr. sting releases the table and takes a power stance instead.

“the manager thinks it would be good for the band’s image to have an exposé piece written on the band as they embark on their first tour. it would also give you,” mr. sting says pointedly, “the chance to get to know them better. mr. hanscom says they’re always writing songs when they’re together, and the tours a perfect opportunity to see them in action.”

okay, to be fair, that actually sounds like a pretty sweet gig. you know, touring with a band, free concerts, an explorative journalism piece... it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity. except eddie’s a professional music critic, not a groupie with a blog. “i write album reviews,” he says, and even patty’s looking at him like he’s the dumbest person in the world.

“for the next five months you’re an album reviewer and a tour journalist, kaspbrak.”

eddie gawps. “five *months* ? isn’t that a little long for a maiden voyage?”

“they’re inviting you, a complete stranger, to come into their intimate tour space to have an exposé piece written about them. clearly they don’t do things half-assed.” mr. sting drops his power pose, but the disappointment is still written clearly on his face. “now, kaspbrak, you know you’re not legally required to do this, and we can’t force you to, but you’d be a fucking moron if you passed this up.” fuck. “if shark puppy continues to win over the world like this, you’re going to lose your audience’s trust. it could ruin you.” mr. sting’s right, and everyone in the room knows it, but that doesn’t mean eddie likes it.

eddie had worked hard for his career, and he isn’t going to let it crash and burn when it’s only just beginning. patty reaches over and taps his hand reassuringly a couple times when he groans.

“i’ll keep the plants watered,” she says, because she’s a good roommate and a terrible friend.

“obviously the band’s going to have to know the uh, man behind the

mask.” eddie makes a vague gesture to himself and patty has the decency to hide her snort under a cough. “but how can we be sure they won’t tell their entire fanbase who j.p grazer really is?”

“same as we know how you won’t expose the dirty little secrets they might have. contracts. hanscom sent some over this morning.” sting slides a packet of paper across the table. a pen comes rolling along after. “sign these, put them on patty’s desk, and go home. you leave tomorrow.”

“tomorrow?” eddie’s stomach churned. he prefers at least a week of packing time in order to a. make sure he didn’t leave anything behind and b. ensure maximum packing space efficiency. he is also terribly, incredibly nervous. “feels a little fast.”

sting just smiles tightly like eddie’s brought this all upon himself — which, you know, he has. “that’s show business, kaspbrak.”

patty answers on the first ring. “are you calling me to avoid something, kaspbrak?”

“no,” eddie lies. “i just missed the annoying sound of your voice.”

patty hums. “yeah, okay. how was your flight? wait, i don’t care — how’s the band? give me the juice.”

“my flight was fine, thank you. and uh—” eddie picks at the pills on the hotel bedspread, wrapping a loose thread around the tip of his finger and tugging it loose. “i haven’t exactly met them yet . i’m supposed to be in the lobby in ten minutes to—”

“aha! so you are avoiding something!”

“congratulations pat, you continue to hold the title of always right.”

“i wear it with modesty.” eddie snorts, and patty laughs too. “so what, are you just sitting in your hotel room fully dressed and

freaking out?”

“i’m not freaking out.” he is freaking out. this is an acceptable thing to freak out about, okay? “i had two bottles of kombucha so i’m really feeling very calm and, like, zen about everything, and i am very much not freaking out.”

“eddie,” patty says, and eddie knows he couldn’t fool her if he tried. a month into his internship he’d moved in with her (living alone in elvira’s house turned out to be both terrifying and horrifying) and since then patty had developed a nearly perfect eddie-ometer.

“the first people to know who the real j.p grazer is and they all already hate him. me. whatever.” eddie rubs his free hand over his face. “five months on the road with the band i called ‘washed up before they even got in the water’. i went to church every week my entire life until college and i’m still being punished!”

“first of all, *i* was the first one to know the real j.p, thank you very much. and second of all,” patty’s tone shifts into something softer — that voice she uses when she’s trying to beat the loving truth into eddie’s thick skull. “they do not hate you. they don’t even *know* you. why would they invite you on a five-month tour if they thought anything else?” eddie tugs another loose thread from the comforter and lets it fall to the carpet. patty’s right, but eddie’s not about to tell her that again. turns out, he doesn’t need to. “listen kid, i gotta go. sting wants me doing all the reviews you were supposed to handle, so i’m waist deep in indie shit and if i don’t start now, i never will.”

eddie glances at the alarm clock screwed onto the side table. “i should probably go down there before someone comes looking for me.”

“you’re gonna kill it, kid. and don’t forget to get me stanley uris’s autograph.” she sighs, and eddie knows if he could see her right now she’d be starry-eyed. “god, that line about opening your legs like opening the gates of eden, oh fuck—”

“ugh, *gross* , i’m hanging up and blocking this number, goodbye forever!”

when he hangs up, patty's cackling, and eddie's got a smile on too. he shoots off a little 'thanks pat' text and pockets his phone with a deep breath.

no time left to hide.

when eddie steps out of the elevator, he's met with immediate chaos. using the little he knows from the information he'd needed to write his review (and the vastness of patty's fangirl knowledge), eddie attempts to match names with faces. patty's boy, stan, is currently piggy-backed on the bassist, mike, having a slap fight with beverly marsh. beverly, who eddie actually thinks is one of the most creative drummers he's ever heard. she's held up by the tamborimbo himself, richie tozier, and bill's standing to the side watching them all fuck around. it's anyone's guess who ben hanscom even is, as he hadn't appeared in any of the PR pictures eddie'd glanced at for reference, but if he has to pick, it'd be the paul bunyan look alike standing at the help-desk talking to the clearly annoyed clerk.

"i'm really sorry about the lamp, it's their first time on tour and they're all a little excited." the man eddie assumes is ben slides an envelope across the counter, which the clerk snippily takes. "i'm really, very, sorry."

"excuse me— ben hanscom?" eddie interrupts, and the closer he gets to the man the smaller he feels. the guy is fucking huge; like, eddie knows he's short, but this guy's a mountain of a man. eddie could probably climb him.

(for a shameless moment, he lets himself imagine it, and then it's right back to business).

"oh! you must be j.p —" eddie cuts him off with a frantic sound, and then smiles off ben's confused look.

"edward kaspbrak. eddie. kaspbrak." *please don't ruin my secret identity in the first three minutes of this job please, please.* thankfully, ben seems to read the terrified mantra in eddie's eyes, and he nods solemnly.

"yes, right, *eddie kaspbrak* ." ben offers up a hand the size of a dinner

plate, and when eddie shakes it, he's surprised at the softness of his grip. "i'm ben hanscom. manager of shark puppy, wrangler of idiots."

"seems like a tough job," eddie laughs, and they both look over to where the slap fight has ended, and the four of them have descended on bill. stanley sounds like he's demanding a rematch; eddie can practically feel the clerk's evil gaze on the group.

ben puts one of his giant hands on eddie's shoulder and nods towards the band. "why don't we go meet the crew?"

bev's the first to separate from the hectic fray, and she bounds over in the coolest pants eddie's seen in the history of, well, ever. "hey! you must be the journalist guy," she doesn't wait for eddie to offer up his hand, just grabs it with her own and squeezes it with a grin. "i'm bev. your shirt's incredible— i love the nearly-sheer look, very modern."

"eddie," he answers, stomach settling a little as her hand drops away. it feels a lot like the first time he hung out with patty. "i— thanks." eddie wants to compliment her right back, but mike appears beside bev looking a little sweaty and entirely eager.

"are you eddie? i'm mike!" mike doesn't bother with a handshake, opting instead for a firm pat on the shoulder that sends eddie stumbling forward a step. "i love your album reviews, man. what you said about strange desire? it's like you took my exact feelings and put them into words."

"i'm b-bill," comes a voice from behind him, and eddie turns to his left to find a man barely taller than him giving a little wave. "y-y-yeah, what mike said."

"stanley," stan says from his right, and eddie spins to look feeling... incredibly disoriented. "i hope you brought earplugs— bill snores."

"i do n-not!"

it's all just... overwhelming. they're all being so kind, so quick to accept him into their lives, and that on its own is enough to make

eddie's cheeks burn. here they are, praising his work and complimenting his shirt, all the while eddie's got lines from his review on repeat in the back of his head. bev smiles encouragingly at him, and eddie thinks about the bit in the article when he said some of their lyrics should be '*flushed to swim with the fishes*'.

"so you're the one who called me an overgrown twink with no rhythm, huh?" when richie tozier first pushes his way into the group of them, all eddie can look at is the downright horrendous peacock printed hawaiian shirt he's got on. he has to actually take a step back in order to look up at richie without straining something in his fucking neck. despite the accusatory words, richie's wearing a smirk. "your flirting could use some work."

finally, he looks up into the man's eyes, and thinks he sees a brief flash of... of something. recognition? eddie's too busy trying to shut out the voice in the back of his head that whispered *oh hot momma* to his libido to think about it too hard. actually, he's been trying to shut out that voice since he'd met ben (and mike, and bill, and stan — bev is gorgeous too, but eddie plays for one team and one team only) but when eddie took in richie's curls and glasses and underfed-giraffe physique, the voice just got louder.

bev gives richie's arm a sharp smack without turning her smile from eddie, but eddie stands up a little taller. honestly, the jab from richie had felt a whole lot better than the onslaught of kindness from everyone else: suddenly, eddie feels like he has his footing again.

"trust me, mr. tozier, you'd know if i was flirting, because it wouldn't be with you." eddie sniffs, and stanley's eyebrows raise.

"can we keep him?" he asks flatly, and bill and bev both snicker.

richie, whom eddie hadn't been able to look away from yet, looks kind of like he's seen a ghost and kind of like he thought that ghost was super hot. "i'd tell you my name so you can scream it later but you clearly already know it."

"oh, beep fucking beep, richie," stanley groans, and eddie doesn't think his face has ever been more red. there's another insult loaded at the back of his tongue because *ew*, but there's a time and place to

roast the fuck out of someone and eddie had already done it in a public music review. he drops his gaze to somewhere — someone — safer, choosing to focus on ben instead.

“is it always like this?” he asks, and ben and mike both nod sadly. “great.”

“alright, enough, ri-richie. leave eddie alone.” bill slides his arm around eddie’s shoulders and jesus, eddie never thought of himself as particularly touch-starved until he’d met these people. “don’t make him write anoth-ther article about you.”

“it was about your *music*,” eddie argues under his breath, but his words are lost under richie’s confusion.

“your name is eddie? i thought it was j.p?”

“that’s just my pseudonym,” eddie says, and why does it feel like he’s coming out of the closet every time he does this? “my name’s eddie kaspbrak.”

richie makes a pained noise. “i think. i am going to go take a shit,” richie says oddly, and they all watch him walk dazedly away with varying degrees of bewilderment.

“that was weird, right?” eddie looks at bev, who looks like she’s trying to put something together. she tucks her short red curls behind her ear and studies eddie with wide, green eyes.

“have you two met before?”

“if we had, i wouldn’t have taken this job,” eddie says, and it’s a joke but the truth remains. eddie could only thank god that he’d never come in contact with richie tozier before today; heart attacks ran in the kaspbrak family.

bev makes a small *huh* sound, and bill, who still has his arm around eddie’s shoulders, gives a shrug. “he’ll grow on yuh-you.”

“the only thing richie grows is fungus where his brain should be,” stan says, and then laughs at his own joke, which makes mike laugh, which makes the rest of them laugh too. eddie watches as these

people — these kids, really, that have known each other as long as they could remember — fall apart from nothing more than each other's joy. as they're finally calming down, richie comes out of the bathroom shaking the water from his hands all over the lobby floor and calls out *what's so funny?* and sets them off all over again.

eddie just watches them all, lips pulled up subconsciously into a private smile, and thinks (hopes, prays) this might not be the worst way to spend five months of his life.

Notes for the Chapter:

* jenny slate screaming *

thanks to jack for letting me use "overgrown twink with no rhythm" - i, like richie, never write my own material. anyways, looking forward to the next chapter when something Actually Happens instead of me throwing every worldbuilding detail at you at once!

3. bill

Summary for the Chapter:

“TOPBUNKTOPBUNKTOPBUNK—” richie’s screams are deafening inside the bus and everyone groans.

“don’t worry,” ben says as they shuffle in. “there’s eight beds: no one has to sleep under him.”

Notes for the Chapter:

and so the tour FINALLY begins. reminder that mickey, jack, and east own my entire heart.

september, 2017

- los angeles

“— and then he punched jay in the face because he’s actually really sensitive about the whole thing, so now noah and jay aren’t talking, and it’s probably just gonna be me and mary at lunch for the rest of the semester.” georgie shrugs, looking far too nonchalant for the ending of that story. *jesus* . if bill misses anything from high school, and if is being used heavy-handed here, *if* bill misses anything from high school it’s those cute little milk containers.

“how is mm-mary doing by the way?” bill’s tone is casually casual, in that real casual kind of way. georgie’s onto him immediately.

“god, you are so lame,” he groans. bill can’t tell through the pixelated screen if georgie’s blushing or not; bets are on *absolutely* as an easy blush is a denbrough gene. georgie had asked mary out this summer after bill (ironically, considering his situation with mike) gave him the push to admit his feelings. little in the world could compare to the feeling bill had experienced looking out into the crowd at the last shark puppy show before tour and seeing georgie and mary sheepishly holding hands. “she’s fine. she’s... well, you know. same as always. it’s good. it’s really... really good.”

there’s a swell of pride, of love, and bill smiles at his screen. “have

you asked her to p-prom yet?”

georgie rolls his eyes. “that’s not until may, dude.” right. bill knew that. he just... ever since things started rolling — like, really rolling, with an agent and a record deal and a tour — bill feels like he’s completely fallen out of georgie’s orbit. it’s the end of the first week of senior year and bill’s having to hear about it over fucking skype. logically he knew that he wasn’t a bad brother for pursuing this music dream, but the insidious thoughts he laid alone with at night told him otherwise. “now *please* tell me about j.p grazer, dude, i’m dying over here. weren’t you supposed to meet him today? does he look like an asshole? did you get him to sign a copy of the shark puppy review for me?”

okay, so bill wasn’t supposed to tell anyone who j.p grazer was — they’d all signed the contracts — and technically he hadn’t. all georgie knew was that j.p was on tour with them, despite having written that article. “yes, no, and i t-told you i’m *not* doing that.” at least not until bill gets to know eddie better; maybe it could be a christmas gift once bill gets home. “he’s... he’s really cool, actually. a little sh-shy, i think. or just overwhelmed by r-richie.”

ben had taken the group of them out to the parking lot after they’d caught their breath to show them the tour busses. yeah, plural. there was no way in hell the six of them, eddie, and the crew could all fit on one.

“one for crew, one for us. figured you wouldn’t mind sharing with us, bev, but—” ben looked apologetic. “i probably should’ve asked.”

“as long as i’m not in the bunk underneath richie, i don’t care.” bev leaned over to eddie, who had started looking a little pale, and stage-whispered so the rest of the group could hear. “worst case of sleep farts i’ve ever encountered.”

“i do *not* fart in my sleep,” richie argued. the rest of them, bill included, had given eddie a *look*. richie absolutely farted in his sleep, and it absolutely smelled. maybe not as bad as beverly said, but bill didn’t say that; bev had managed to put a smile on eddie’s face, and there was no point ruining that. “however, i *will* be taking a top bunk so one of you will have to suffer.”

“if you don’t sleep fart, what’re we suffering for?”

“thank you for volunteering, ben!” richie gave a defeated looking ben a slap on the back before walking up to the side of the bus and saying “now how the fuck does this luggage thing open?”

“wh-which bus is eddie going to be on?” bill assumed that eddie wasn’t a crew member — eddie was writing about them, not working for them — but bill also didn’t know if ben was including eddie in the *us* . there was a small thud from the bus, and bill heard richie say ‘*shit.*’

“it’s up to you, eddie,” ben said. “there’s an extra bed on both. i didn’t know which one you’d prefer, so...” he trailed off with a shrug, and eddie bit his lip, eyes switching between the crew bus and where richie had been yanking at the luggage door. *jesus, richie.*

“probably— probably your bus, right?” eddie said. the luggage door of the bus flew open with a loud *thwack* . richie waved from where he’d fallen.

“my bad.”

“if it’s not broken,” eddie had added. then, a little softer, “if you’ll uh — if you’ll have me.” of course they’d all ensured him immediately that they’d much rather have eddie than richie — ‘*hey!*’

“i think everyone gets overwhelmed by richie,” georgie says, breaking bill from the memory.

“i th-think you’re right,” bill grins, and georgie starts to say something else but the door to the hall opens and when bill turns over his shoulder he sees mike step inside. “hey m-mikey.”

“hey mike,” georgie calls from the laptop, and mike lets the door fall closed behind him as he comes in beaming. it’s an overwhelming image, and bill has to turn back to his laptop to keep his sanity.

“hey bill,” mike squats into frame, one hand on the back of bill’s chair. “hey georgie.” bill’s sweating because mike’s face is just *right there* in his space which isn’t super out of the ordinary but bill’s only human and mike’s like the sun. then, as quickly as mike was in his

space, mike's out of it, towering near the edge of the desk. "i'm gonna shower, that cool?"

"obviously," bill says, which is *not* cool, but mike's still smiling at him, toothy and warm.

"see ya later georgie," mike calls, and bill forces himself to keep his eyes on the screen instead of following mike's path to the bathroom. the door snaps shut, there's a little click, and then bill can finally breathe.

"so," georgie smirks, and bill flips him off. "how's that going?"

"i duh-don't know what you're talking about." bill refuses to acknowledge his feelings out loud— he'll never confirm or deny anything to anybody. not stan, not georgie, and especially not mike. "we're only here fo-or a night, and everybody paired up to sh-share rooms, and i... d-don't have to explain myself to you."

"yeah, okay bill."

they talk for a bit longer after that; the first show of the tour is tomorrow, and bill isn't sure when the next time they'd both have a free moment is going to be. eventually, though, georgie's yawning; it's barely 9pm in LA, but in derry it's practically a new day, so bill and his brother say their goodbyes.

"and tell mrs. m-murryn i miss her!" mrs. murryn, aka bill's favorite english teacher (and, who was he kidding, favorite teacher all around) from highschool and georgie's current english teacher.

"she's not gonna remember you, dude."

"just t-tell her," he insists, and georgie rolls his eyes but nods before they both hang up.

bill, exhausted, crawls into the bed not currently occupied by a still-wet mike hanlon.

"we haven't even left and i'm already homesick," mike says, and he laughs, but bill senses there's truth to it. "i miss mr. chips, man. it's barely been two days— how am i supposed to go five *months* ?" oh,

so it was missing-mr.-chips hours, then. bill had just gotten comfortable, but he gets up and moves to sit next to mike at the edge of his bed: over mike's bare shoulder, bill sees he's looking at a picture of the dog in question.

"did your muh-mom send you that?" coming from richie, that might have been a completely different sentence. mike nods, and swipes so bill can see the other six she sent along with it. mike really loves his dog. if bill were to guess, mike misses mr. chips just about as much as bill misses his brother. at least bill can skype georgie. *ha* . bill smiles to himself, picturing mike on a skype call with his dog.

good morning mr. chips! who's a good boy?

bark bark!

"hey, space cadet." mike shoulders bill gently, shaking him from the vision. "i asked you a question."

"wuh-what? sorry." bill looks down, cheeks burning. damn those denbrough genes.

mike doesn't seem bothered. he never does, but especially never with bill. "i asked if you were excited. you know, for the tour we're on? with our *band*?" he shoulders bill again and just the contact against bill's t-shirt has his skin aflame. "man, we're rockstars. *us* . i mean, i always knew richie and bev would be famous for something, but." mike shakes his head, and bill gets it. "not me."

"m-me neither," bill says, and he smiles. "i don't think i could d-do this alone." when bill turns, they meet eyes, and mike's are fond—soft. bill basks in it, rolls around like a cat in the sunlight.

"me neither," mike echoes, and bill wishes his mouth wasn't so cluttered so he could tell mike *it makes sense together* and *it makes sense with you* , but he'd just stumble and jumble it all up, so what was the point? "the losers stick together, right?" mike says, and he holds up a fist, waits for bill to finish the motion. "the bullied to the billionaires."

bill snorts. they're nowhere near that famous and probably never will

be, but mike is right about one thing; bill knocks his fist against mike's. "yeah. losers s-stick together."

"TOPBUNKTOPBUNKTOPBUNK—" richie's screams are deafening inside the bus and everyone groans.

"don't worry," ben says as they shuffle in. "there's eight beds: no one has to sleep under him."

bill ends up on a bottom bunk across from mike and bev; stan takes the one above bill, claiming he's not going to get near the nest of sexual tension down the hall. bill turns his head, confused. half of richie's torso is hanging off the top bed, face going pink from the bloodrush, and bill thinks he hears richie say something about spiderman kissing and eddie goes pinker than richie. ben's face is pure misery.

bill looks up at bev, who's also watching them, her eyes narrowed. from under her, mike asks "do you think that's going to be a problem?"

"depends on whether or not eddie's into the whole obnoxiously charming thing," stan pipes up, and bill hears a thump in the hall behind him. he decides not to look.

"wait, wh-wh-what are you guys talking about?"

"richie's flirting with eddie."

"richie flirts with e-e-everyone," bill says, which is true. richie flirts with his own reflection in bar bathroom mirrors.

bev shoots stan a look and says, "yeah, you're right bill," before the subject drops. okay, weird. bill shrugs, pulls up twitter, and scrolls until the bus pulls into the lot of the venue ten minutes later.

the kick-off of the tour starts in LA. colleen and the other executives

had decided to begin there and travel across the country until their final show, right in their hometown of derry. *it's sentimental* , colleen had said at the meeting a few months ago. *your families will love it*. there was a silent '*most of our families kinda suck actually*' passed in the expressions of the losers but, in the end, they'd all decided that it was in fact a pretty dope idea.

colleen had said other things too: she'd told them about the lures of sex and drugs and alcohol on tour, about how easy it was to fall into the grips of toxic habits when your whole life was reduced to a bus and your thousands of fans. she talked about the importance of drinking water (richie) and eating at least kind of well (richie) and actually getting sleep (richie) and after she'd targeted richie's horrible self-care habits, she'd asked if there was anything PR needed to know.

"like wh-what?"

"like if any of you are dating— or might, at some point, begin dating — someone else in the band. just so we can stay on top of things. ben and i have to make sure we know how to handle any potential tabloid scandals before they even happen."

"i can tell you right now i'm gonna be getting *loads* of ass," richie informed the room with a dead-pan face. "so prepare for the media swarm over america's most charming man."

once stan had shut richie up — *the media already swarms over chris evans, richie* — ben admitted he and bev had dated in high school, and no, they wouldn't be dating again. if bill had been paying attention, he might've been skeptical about that; he was too busy looking very closely at the conference room table and avoiding stan's pointed gaze to think about it, though.

so no, there was no intermingling within shark puppy. just... thoughts of intermingling.

a lot of thoughts.

once they're parked, the seven of them file off the bus (richie jumps from the first stair to the sidewalk, only barely catching himself

before he wipes out). the crew is already running around: pushing heavy equipment on overloaded dollies, hooking up audio, rolling out the stage mats, and overall making the band members look completely useless as they stand and watch.

“maybe we should... help?” ben looks at them all pointedly, like it’s not really a suggestion.

richie claps his hands together. “right-o, captain! c’mon chaps, we’ve got a show to do!” with that, he hooks an arm around stan’s shoulder and drags him towards the open doors of the backstage, effectively kidnapping him. bev and mike decide they’re the strongest and head towards where the rest of the crew is unloading equipment, and before bill can ask what he should do, ben’s stepping away to take a call.

“i’m going to be honest here— i have no clue what i’m supposed to be doing.” bill turns, because oh, yeah, eddie.

“m-me either,” bill says, and they share a relieved smile. “maybe we should ch-check to see if the green room has snacks?”

“that is an outstanding idea,” eddie agrees, and they both start walking like they have any clue where they’re going.

“so have you ever been to—” bill starts, at the same time eddie says “i’m sorry for the—”

“wh-what?”

“you first.”

“i was juh-just going to ask if you’ve ever been to a concert,” bill says, “but now that i ask it seems kind of s-stupid.” asking a music critic if they’d ever been to a concert - bill’s incredible brain, back and better than ever.

“do piano recitals at churches count as concerts?” eddie asks, and bill laughs.

“i g-guess. do people throw their bras on stage at piano recitals?” and then eddie laughs too.

“definitely not.” a pause. “wait, people throw their bras at you?”

“ri-richie only hopes.”

eddie shakes his head, quietly amused. the backstage area is crowded, buzzing with stressed-out audio people holding cords and a laughing bev whizzing by on a wardrobe cart pushed by mike. “no,” eddie finally admits. “esteemed music critic j.p grazer has never actually been to a real rock concert. or— indie? alternative?” eddie shrugs. “your stuff falls into a couple of categories. the point is i...” he sucks in a breath. “have no idea what to expect tonight.”

“juh-just don’t stand in the front. richie and stan like to encou-cou-the they like to start a mosh pit.” richie on his own could be plenty of trouble, but stan’s an enabler, which was almost worse.

“oh god, oh no,” eddie laughs, a little manic. “i won’t be in the crowd. are you kidding? have you seen those floors?” bill had not, but any place that served beer and played live music usually had the sticky concrete to show for it. “i will be sitting off-stage with a drink and a notepad, trying to write...” eddie trails off, and bill gets the idea he’s talking more to himself when he does finish the sentence. “whatever it is i’m supposed to be writing.”

it’s a little disappointing that eddie won’t be out in the crowd -- the whole point of this was to show eddie who shark puppy really was, right? how can they do that without eddie actually seeing them perform? not that bill would say that. eddie’s got a job to do, and if bill’s being honest, eddie doesn’t seem like the type who’d enjoy being sardined in with a crowd of clammy strangers, so he can’t blame eddie’s dismissal of the idea.

(it still stings. bill reminds himself that they only met a day and a half ago, and that there are things about eddie bill simply doesn’t know. yet.)

bill and eddie find the door (after dodging bev whooshing by on the cart again) to the green room and are pleased to find that yes, the green room does indeed have snacks. bill’s already got a mouthful of cheeto puffs when eddie finds the courage to say what he’d been trying to earlier.

“i’m sorry for the article,” eddie blurts out, and bill’s eyes widen. there are too many cheetos in his mouth to say anything back: eddie takes that as an opportunity. “it wasn’t personal — i mean, i guess it was, since it’s your music, but i was just— you know, it’s my job and —” bill chews harder: he can feel the cheeto dust packing itself against the roof of his mouth. “i was probably a little harsh, all things considered, especially when i said—” eddie cuts himself off again. “i just... need you to know i’m sorry?”

“we don’t hate you,” bill spits out, which is a little blunt, and little bits of cheeto go flying onto the carpet with the ferocity in which he’d said it, but he needed eddie to know. “ri-richie taped the article to his wall. seriously.” eddie stands there, lips parted and eyebrows drawn together like it doesn’t quite make sense. bill wipes the orange spit from his chin and keeps going. “some of the things yuh-you said were right. we aren’t perfect. we’ve never d-done any of this before.” sometimes, bill still felt like he’d wake up any minute and find he was still in derry, working at staples and watching mike trim his sheep. which would still be awesome, of course. “juh-just, you know. so you know.”

it’s not the most well thought out or comforting thing that bill’s ever said by a long-shot, but the tension that had been wound in eddie’s shoulders seems to drop away.

“i— well.” eddie’s eyes are mostly unreadable when they meet bill’s. in the midst of it all, bill thinks he might see relief though— and maybe a bit of hope. “thanks anyways. for giving me another chance.”

“thanks for giving sh-shark puppy one, too.” the moment is quiet, and small, and bill’s glad they’ve sorted this before they all spend five months awkwardly dancing around each other.

“also you have some spit on your—”

“yuh-yeah, i can feel it.”

everything that could go wrong goes wrong.

the lightboard freezes in pre-show, and alex only has the length of the opening chant to reset it. luckily, it resets (after an awkwardly long shark puppy ooh rah rah opener that, after three minutes, fizzled into confused heckles). not so luckily, the reset wipes all of the light cues from the board, and alex has to improv her light mixing through the entire show. it's something only the band and the crew would notice because alex is a lighting *genius*, but the entire experience throws everyone off so bad that bev yells out WE ARE PUPPY SHARK instead of their actual name. mike plays the bassline intro to 'red hot summer' instead of 'rock fight', which jumbles up their whole set order, and, for some reason, bill's hands shake so bad the whole show that he doesn't get through a single song without a mistake. richie's horrendously ugly pants slip down as he dances across the stage, and the entire room gets an eyeful of his equally ugly underwear. it's just... bad.

the only good thing is that the fans still go wild, even in their confusion.

"should we even bother with an encore?" stan asks, looking way less sweaty but just as defeated as the rest of them. the crowd chants, deafening even from backstage. *encore, encore, encore.*

"you can't quit now." eddie's standing away from the rest of them, face unreadable and arms crossed protectively over his chest. he takes a little step forward. "the concert might've sucked, but—" eddie's eyes find richie's first, and then bev's, and mike's and stan's and ben's, and finally bill's before he looks off towards the stage. "this is your second chance, right? you can't start a tour out by giving up."

encore, encore, encore.

"now that's the fuckin' spirit, eds!" richie says, and bill watches eddie's face twist with disgust as richie pulls him in for a (very, very sweaty) one-armed hug. it's unclear if richie hears the *don't call me eds* when eddie squirms out of his grip because he's already joining

the crowd's cheers. "encore! encore! encore!"

bev joins in. "encore! encore! encore!" and ben, too, and mike. bill and stan stare at each other, bill with the biggest, cheesiest smile his body can muster, until stan's grinning too.

richie doesn't wait for a verbal confirmation, just sprints toward the darkened stage screaming "SHARK PUPPY!" and sends the entire audience into a fit.

"SHARK PUPPY," the rest of them scream, and they run on to join richie, leaving ben and eddie to watch from the side-lines.

they kill their encore. like, *kill* it. it was easily their best performance of 'blood oath' and 'i wear glasses' ever. the crowd had screamed for a good five minutes after they'd left the stage for good, only stopping when alex brought up the house lights and the crew began packing it all in. if eddie hadn't said something, they might not have even gone back out.

thank god for second chances , bill thinks.

after the show, richie's desperate to get drunk (and so are the rest of them) but ben corrales them onto the bus because they have to leave within the hour to make it to the next town before their show tomorrow.

"then i'm getting drunk on the bus, and no one can stop me."

richie does not get drunk on the bus. none of them do. a wave of exhaustion, hidden under the nerves and exhilaration of the evening, hits all of them like a punch to the face. richie passes out fully dressed with one leg hanging off the bed before the bus is even moving. mike has to forcefully drag stan (and his sharpie) away from richie's sleeping face. by the time they pull out of the parking lot, just about everyone is in bed on their way to dream town. just about.

“h-hey,” bill says to eddie, who’s sitting in the little breakfast nook and staring at his notepad. it’s blank. “b-burning the midnight oil?” bill doesn’t even know what that means. his dad used to say it a lot when he’d come in and find bill hunched over his desk past bedtime, so bill can only assume he’s using the phrase correctly.

“kind of,” eddie says, smiling tightly. he doesn’t elaborate; bill doesn’t ask.

“i’m wiped, so i’m g-gonna—” bill motions vaguely towards the back of the bus where the rest of his friends are sleeping. eddie nods. “but thanks. for earlier.”

eddie shrugs. “you guys would’ve gone out anyway.”

“m-maybe. but we probably would’ve sucked again.”

“maybe.” eddie doesn’t seem inclined to take credit where credit’s due. bill tries not to push it; there’s something growing here, something that looks an awful lot like *friendship* and *trust* and bill refuses to tread all over it.

“g-get some sleep. ri-richie’s a handful in the morning,” bill says eventually. before he can stop himself he reaches out and ruffles eddie’s hair. it’s a gesture that probably would’ve been more appropriate for richie, or georgie, if eddie’s odd look is anything to go by, but bill’s never been good at keeping himself from showing people he cares. *a boy with a heart too big for his chest* . “guh-goodnight.”

“uh— yeah, goodnight bill.”

so bill heads to bed, leaving a lost-looking eddie alone with his blank notepad.

4. eddie

Summary for the Chapter:

how long has it been since he'd sat down and played? a year, at least. since college, if he has to answer. with practice rooms lining the music hallways there was never a shortage of accessible pianos. whenever eddie was bored, or practicing, or (a few times) drunk, he could just go down to the arts building and play whatever the fuck he wanted until four in the morning. there's no keyboard in his and patty's apartment — it's simply too small — and even if there was one he'd never get to play it; not with pitchfork consuming his time and energy like a goddamn life-force vacuum.

playing the first note is like hacking into a dormant part of his brain. his fingers start moving before eddie even has the thought to make them move, an eager portamento from low to high filling the room with bellowing sound. maybe zuz had turned the volume up too high — whatever, it isn't eddie's problem. without johannes here to reprimand him, eddie cracks his knuckles; fuck a warm up, eddie wants to play. so he does.

Notes for the Chapter:

see end notes for links! if youre lucky enough to not know what i mean when i say 'heart and soul' pls click [this](#).

also now theres a [pinterest board](#)!

september-october, 2017

- on the road...

eddie stares down at his notebook. a full two weeks of the tour has

passed and eddie still hasn't written a fucking thing. granted, not much has actually happened (aside from the, you know, concerts or whatever), but still. eddie feels like he should be writing... something. right?

well, okay, his notepad isn't completely blank: there are a couple of scribbles from when he sat back stage and tried to look busy, avoiding the questioning looks and poorly-disguised whispers from the crew. the only people who knew explicitly who eddie was and why he was on the road with them was the band and whatever higher ups had brought him here: to the rest of the people on this tour, he was a lump of a man sitting on a stool and staying as far away from the action as he could. not like he was actively avoiding talking to people or anything, he was just. you know.

actively avoiding talking to people.

eddie is trying, okay, he *is*, but there isn't much to watch, not really. since none of them have ever done anything like this (except richie, who'd apparently trekked europe with nothing but a backpack and a strong drive to meet as many beautiful people as he could) most of the first week had been spent sleeping, eating, and performing; no one had the energy to do much more than get off the bus and get back on. they're all, eddie included, just trying to find some sort of rhythm — to memorize the moves and perfect the dance.

actually, okay, there's more than *just* scribbles. there are little notes, little observations from the sidelines where eddie has begun to make his place.

- *tour bus toilet is for pee only!!! thanks richie!!!*

- *mike hanlon - pancakes. insomnia.*

the tour bus has a small kitchen that, for the most part, sits unused. fast food is easier, and the green rooms at venues usually came magically stocked with whatever snacks the band might be craving at that moment (eddie had a feeling that had to do a lot with ben's foresight, but hearing bill say '*this one has cheeto puffs too!*' before every show hadn't gotten old yet). once, though, eddie had awoken

after a violent speed bump in the middle of the night and smelled burnt sugar from the front of the bus. balanced precariously at the edge of his top-bunk, eddie had pushed the separation slider open just enough to peek out, only to see mike standing alone in a pair of boxers eating fresh pancakes straight from the pan. eddie only let himself creep for a few seconds (it felt like a private moment between mike and his comfort food) but mike caught his eye in the dim light anyway and gave him a little wink. the slider had closed so quickly in eddie's surprise that it disturbed richie on the bunk across from him and eddie flipped over so fast he hit his head against the wall just so richie wouldn't catch him awake.

- bill and mike... ? hm.

- AUDIO EQUIPMENT IS NOT FURNITURE

- ben hanscom - a lot of plaid. loves emma watson?

sometimes eddie would catch ben smiling at his phone, like he'd just gotten a particularly sweet text, and eddie would very casually shift to see what he was looking at. when it wasn't the weird meme richie had mass emailed on tour (a group that eddie had somehow been inserted into, despite never giving richie his email) it was, almost always, that picture of emma watson he used as a lockscreen. which was... a little odd, if eddie was being honest, but there had also been a small portion of his life where he'd hidden a picture of bill hader between his bed frame and mattress just to stare at sometimes, so he never commented.

- need to find laundromat soon..

- stan 'the man' uris - unclear why they call him the man. very clear why patty fangirls.

eddie still hasn't come around to the idea of standing out in the crowd for a show (he will eventually. probably. he'll get there, okay?) but he has moved up from just listening to actually watching from the sidelines. richie was usually where his eyes were drawn to first (just because he moved around so much, and hit the tambourine

very obnoxiously, and his clothes were really ugly and loud and hard to look away from, and that was *it*) but watching stan was a whole other experience. usually, eddie could only see half of his face, which was still enough to show stan's quietly captivating presence on stage. eddie wondered if the audience could see the extent of his facial expressions from where they stood, and knew that if they couldn't, they were missing out on some of the best reactions to some of the worst jokes (usually from richie).

- *new headphones (noise cancelling) (sorry ben)*

- *bill and mike ?????*

- *beverly bev marsh knows EVERYTHING*

there was simply no way for over ten years of history between six people to be explained in a day (or even a full five months, really, with all the intricacies and secrets of six separate lives entwined) but that didn't stop bev from trying, or eddie from listening. on their way to nothern california, bev had crawled up into eddie's bunk with two bags of twizzlers and more information than eddie knew what to do with. *stanley's jewish* and *richie's supposed to be ; yes, really, ben used to be shorter than me* and *mike plays harmonica to lull his sheep to sleep ; last year bill choked on a corndog and he still won't quit talking with his mouth full* and *just because i have a fashion degree doesn't mean i can't wear something - i just have to wear it better than anyone else* . between stanley's heart-boner for birds and the fact shark puppy's song '*silver*' is actually about bill's fucking childhood bike, eddie felt like his head was going to explode. then bev, as observant as she is kind, had tapped his nose with the end of her twizzler and asked him if he'd noticed the sexual tension between bill and mike yet.

"so they *aren't* fucking?"

"only with their eyes."

"but mike is clearly— *bill* is clearly— "

"yeah," bev had said, fond exasperation written all over her face as she shoved two entire twizzlers in her mouth. "clearly *stupid* ."

when the separation slider opened two hours later and ben came in, he'd taken one worried look at bev and eddie collapsed in tearful laughter on top of empty candy bags and said "oh, i don't like this at all."

- bev and patty should Never meet (for safety of eddie kaspbraks everywhere)

- don't play bruce springsteen around richie unless prepared for an impromptu serenade

- do Not touch stan's oreos

bill had taken the blame for that. eddie finished off the package in the morning and in the afternoon stan came stomping into the green room, empty oreo package waving around like it was his goddamn 95 theses.

"who ate the last of my oreos? who fucking did it?"

bill had snorted, actually — had looked at stan and said "who's still st-stu-stupid enough to eat stan's or—" but then his eyes had fallen on eddie's horrified expression. "it was m-me," bill rephrased.

stan lowered the package, eyes narrowed like he didn't quite believe him. "billiam," stan sniffed, and then dropped the empty package in front of bill. "you have disappointed me." with one last hard look and a slow shake of his head, stan turned on his heel and walked out.

"i didn't realize it was going to be such a big deal," eddie breathed once stan had left. the color started to return to his face. "thanks, bill. though he seemed to take it pretty well from you."

"oh no, suh-something very bad is going to happen to me," bill said, but he didn't look scared — defeated, maybe, like resistance was futile. "ri-richie woke up to half an eyebrow missing when he ate the l-last of stan's stash in m-middle school." eddie's eyes widened. if bill woke up without an eyebrow, eddie would have to live with knowing that the shitstorm over debrough's new punk look would be completely his fault. all eddie had wanted was a nice midnight snack, and there had only been two left (and it's not like stan's name had

been on them!!!), and now bill's eyebrows were on trial. eddie took a slow, centering sip of kombucha.

"sorry," mike had said after a few moments of quiet, and he stood up to grab the discarded package. "it's just gonna bother me if i don't throw this away."

- richie voice count: british, radio announcer, old lady (just awful), a butler (supposed to be different from british - isn't),

- richie: tells people he takes his coffee black and then orders mocha frappes from starbucks

- there is, apparently, no print that is too gaudy for richie's stupid hawaiian shirts

the longer eddie looks at his notes, the more he realizes how often he's scribbled something down about richie. eddie peeks up over the top of his notepad; across from him, richie's bed is empty. sometimes, when eddie sits on his phone before a show, he can feel eyes on the back of his neck. sometimes he can feel them when he's sitting in the breakfast nook while the band sits around in silence waking up together. when eddie's curled up in the sheets after the rush of a concert or another long day of travel — he can feel them then, too. every time eddie turns to the source, though, richie's looking at something, someone else.

and every time, eddie still feels a flame ignite beneath his skin.

he closes his notebook with a snap. that's enough of that for now.

october, 2017

• portland, oregon

the venue is almost completely empty. getting to portland early means that most people have scattered into the city to explore and find the best food spots. eddie had almost gone to find a decent thai place, but on his way out, he'd seen stan's keyboard. it'd been so long since he played that his fingers ached with the urge. when bev asked if he was coming with them to get food, he turned her down, and wandered around until the rest of the crew had gone off, too.

"they gone?" he asks zuzanna, the audio head. she always wears this headband with two plastic shark-heads attached to springs that bounce around when she walks. they don't sell those at the merch tables, which meant she made it herself.

eddie likes her a lot.

"yessir! piano's all hooked up and ready for a good poundin'!" zuzanna smiles brightly. the phrasing is part of her charm. "whenever you're done just send me a text and i'll shut it down."

"but i don't have your— "

"oh, right! here, put your name in and send yourself a little somethin'-somethin'." zuzanna hands eddie her phone. her sharks bob back and forth in the wind as he punches in his number and sends himself a little wave emoji. there's a vibration in his back pocket.

"got it. thanks, zuzanna."

"call me zuz!" she says, and then lights up a blunt. eddie walks inside.

stepping out onto the stage makes eddie's stomach flip. there's no audience, no stage lights, and yet... eddie still has the feeling he's being watched. he shakes it off: it's just a stage. he's performed at recitals before. nothing new, right?

stanley's keyboard is immaculately clean. there's no dirt tucked in between keys, or dust around the buttons. there's a single bi pride sticker attached to the plastic at the top, but past that, it's cleaner than the piano at nana's house. eddie's lips thin. some day he will be

able to look at a piano and not think about nana at all. gingerly, eddie sits, and places his fingers on the keys.

how long has it been since he'd sat down and played? a year, at least. since college, if he has to answer. with practice rooms lining the music hallways there was never a shortage of accessible pianos. whenever eddie was bored, or practicing, or (a few times) drunk, he could just go down to the arts building and play whatever the fuck he wanted until four in the morning. there's no keyboard in his and patty's apartment — it's simply too small — and even if there was one he'd never get to play it; not with pitchfork consuming his time and energy like a goddamn life-force vacuum.

playing the first note is like hacking into a dormant part of his brain. his fingers start moving before eddie even has the thought to make them move, an eager portamento from low to high filling the room with bellowing sound. maybe zuz had turned the volume up too high — whatever, it isn't eddie's problem. without johanness here to reprimand him, eddie cracks his knuckles; fuck a warm up, eddie wants to *play* . so he does.

eddie's fingers fly across the keys and the sound of beethoven's *moonlight sonata* hits the room at full speed. not the first movement - yeah, sure, the first was beautiful yada yada yada, but god, the third? to be frank, it was one of music's most thrilling fucking creations. as opposed to the tranquil (sleep-inducing) opening of the song, the third movement feels like eddie's doing goddamn finger gymnastics. the music's a flurry of arpeggios and high-energy sforzando notes that honest to god had taken eddie's breath away the first time he'd heard it. of all the songs he'd had to memorize — and there had been a lot of songs he'd had to memorize — eddie never felt more at home than sitting in the middle of moonlight sonata's end.

it's been too long since he's played (and even longer since he's played on a keyboard) and his fingers keep sliding onto the wrong notes (prompting him to swear under his breath) and he falls off rhythm a few times (maybe he should've warmed up) but the further he gets into the song the more at-home he feels.

"jesus fuck," he says, and "shitting fuck" and "fuck" and "god fucking damn it" and "fucker" and "mother fucking fucker fuck" until it's a

melody of its own, layered over the pounding rhythm. eddie's never seen himself play, but he thinks he probably looks like a truly chaotic madman right now. he couldn't be happier.

all at once, with a sprinting arpeggio and an exorbitantly dramatic flourish, the song is finished. eddie smiles privately as something inside him finally balances.

"that was fucking incredible," comes a voice from behind him, and eddie screams so loud it echoes.

seeing richie standing there (in his stupid clothes with his stupid hair) is as unsurprising as it is unwelcome. "what the fuck?! how long have you been standing there?"

"long enough to hear your remix of *moonlight sonata* ," richie grins, and he doesn't look apologetic in the slightest. "i don't know why no one's thought of adding expletives to the classical genre before."

"fuck you," eddie says, and he turns back to the keys so no one but god can see his pink cheeks. "it's been a long time."

"i'm gonna be honest," richie starts, and to eddie's horror, he sits on the bench beside him. the small, suddenly very crowded bench. "i didn't know you could play at all. kinda thought music critics were like gym teachers, you know? can't actually play, so they teach?"

"that is offensive to music critics everywhere," eddie retorts. stan's keyboard really is so pretty. eddie stares down at it, looking very studiously at the bi flag sticker because it's nice to look at and not because he's avoiding looking up at richie. "i can't believe you'd compare us to gym teachers."

"oh ho! good one, eds," richie laughs, and eddie starts to say don't call me eds but richie keeps talking. "funny and talented fingers. killer combo."

somehow, eddie's cheeks burn brighter. finally, he looks over, eyebrows set flat and annoyed.

"you're disgusting."

“thank you. i try,” richie says, that stupid grin still on his stupid face. his eyes are big and green and really fucking round under the magnification of his thick-lensed glasses and eddie doesn’t realize he’s getting lost in them until it’s too late. richie’s arm bumps against eddie’s when it moves, snapping him out of it. “you know, i can play piano, too.”

“oh?”

“yep,” richie says, and eddie can’t tell if he’s going for british or butler right now. “i reckon i’m not quite as good as you, ol’ chap,” definitely british. “but i could give you a run for your money.”

“well, if you’re so confident,” eddie shifts minutely like he’s making room for richie at the piano, but their thighs are still pressed together — burning. “please, show me your ways.”

“as you wish.” long fingers (and god, were they long, and oddly spindly, all bone and skin but apparently eddie is fucking into that) hover over the keys. when eddie looks up, richie’s eyes are closed in concentration; it kind of sounds like he’s humming. the whole thing is very dramatic and very, very *richie*. “tell me if you recognize this one: it’s a little underground.”

when richie starts the first notes of *‘heart and soul’*, eddie gets up.

“no, no, *no*, stop, not allowed, fuck you,” he states, and he tries to walk away but richie calls after him, still playing.

“ah, c’mon, eddie! duet with me!”

“fuck you!”

“this is a once in a lifetime opportunity—”

reflexively, eddie’s hands go to his hips. “do you understand how many times i’ve had to hear little assholes tell me ‘oh! i cAn pLaY PiAno tOO!’ and then butcher that overplayed melody? that’s not even how the real song goes!” eddie huffs, and when he looks at richie, the man has stopped playing and is now mirroring his pose with an exaggerated pout. eddie drops his hands. “no.”

“please?” and a deep part of eddie (the one that also thought richie’s eyes are pretty and his face was nice to look at)... kind of wants to. “aren’t you supposed to be writing an article on the creation and collaboration of music in shark puppy? what better way than to sit down with one of the songwriters? i’m basically doing your job for you.”

“by forcing me to duet *‘heart and soul?’* ”

“exactly,” richie says, and he’s still fucking pouting. without looking, richie moves a hand to the keyboard and begins playing the lower accompaniment. eddie, who never really learned to follow through with his no’s, sits back down and reluctantly joins richie with the melody.

they play through it twice before eddie groans. “this song still sucks.”

“you’re right,” richie nods, and there’s a little glint of mischief behind the rims of his glasses. “hey, why don’t we swap parts? i’m uh,” richie flips his curls. “more of a melody guy anyways.”

holding back an eye roll (and a smile) eddie wordlessly swaps to the bass line. by the time he’s dropped his hand down the keys, it’s too late to understand the ramifications: richie’s arm crosses over his to hit the higher notes, and their skin brushes with every little movement. god, patty would have a field day if she could see this. one of the most romantic moments of his life and he’s playing the most abhorrent song in the world with someone who regularly wears socks with ‘stocks.

not that it’s actually a romantic moment, or anything: not only does eddie have 0 feelings for richie whatsoever, he also can’t. mr. sting had been very clear that if he found out about any kind of canoodling between eddie and his new co-workers (i.e any member of shark puppy or their crew), eddie would lose his job.

“you wouldn’t fuck me, right? so don’t fuck shark puppy. the end.”

eddie still isn’t sure what the point of that threat had been, but sting was fucking scary, so eddie listened.

he's caught up in the warmth of richie's arm just barely pressed against his own, eddie misses exactly when richie starts to change things up. before, richie had been clumsily attacking the notes of the song like they owed him money: now, eddie can recognize the correct positioning of his hands, the proper way his fingers slide off each key. and he isn't just playing the '*heart and soul*' melody anymore — the tune is shifting into something eddie vaguely recognized.

"is th— is this the theme from super mario brothers?" richie doesn't say anything; his smile is telling enough. eddie's still playing somehow, even as he watches richie's movements get more and more intricate, hands jumping across the keys in a weird, jazzy mash-up of the song. and then it's changing again, melting into something new. three chords in, eddie's fingers slip with his silent laughter. it's the fucking wii music. the mii channel theme song bounces out of the keyboard fruitily until eddie pulls his hand away completely because he's laughing too hard to keep it up anymore. richie doesn't miss a beat.

the melody continues to change: an adele song, and '*dancing queen*', and a few more that eddie can't place at all. (eddie's face fills with shame when he realizes that richie's begun playing '*heart and soul*' from camp rock 2: the only good thing about the experience is knowing richie must have seen the movie too). and eddie... eddie can't look away. the creativity with which richie plays makes up for the lack of technical perfection — maybe johannes would be rolling in his metaphorical grave, but eddie couldn't be anything but awed. richie throws his entire body into playing — just as he does with his tamborine, or his singing — to the point that the keyboard stand rattles with enthusiasm. as the music filling the room slows, eddie's eyes move (with difficulty) from richie's hands to his face.

big mistake!

distantly, eddie recognizes that richie's actually playing the real version now, the hoagy carmichael original. maybe he should make a comment, say something snarky about how richie had finally figured out how to play it, but... there's a softness to richie's face as he plays, this little echo of a smile on all his features. in a way that shouldn't be possible for a man who'd just obnoxiously played different versions of '*heart and soul*' for five minutes, richie looks... almost

angelic. before eddie has the chance to look away, richie ends the song with a trill and a chord.

“an audience is supposed to clap when a performance is finished,” richie says. eddie doesn’t clap. he also doesn’t look away. richie’s words may have been pompous, but his eyes are locked with eddie’s like he can’t look away either.

there are a hundred different questions at the tip of eddie’s tongue. *where’d you learn to play like that? how do you let yourself go enough to improvise? can you teach me? why did no one tell me you could play anything other than tamborine? did you watch camp rock on purpose or did it come on and you were too high to change the channel?* eddie doesn’t ask any of these questions. “weren’t you supposed to be getting shawarma with bev?”

“i was,” richie admits, and the corner of his mouth pulls up, just a little. “but i thought it’d be more fun to bother you.” briefly, eddie entertains flinging himself off the balcony seating. it’d be quick; might not kill him, but it’d give him the broken bones he’d need to get the fuck away from this tour. “plus she said she’d bring me some falafel back, so.”

“well you did it. you bothered me.” the patty that lived in the back of eddie’s head called out *in more ways than one!* “congratulations.”

“how come you never told us you can play piano?”

“i—” eddie’s mouth opens as he searches for words — for a reason. “i guess it never really came up.”

richie makes a fart noise. “you’re on tour with a bunch of musicians and the fact you can just whip out the third movement of moonlight sonata *like that* just... never came up?” curls fall into his face when richie shakes his head, and he pushes them back with one big hand. “that’s bologna if i ever heard it, eds.”

“don’t call me eds,” is the first thing out of eddie’s mouth, which makes richie open his like he’s going to speak again, so eddie keeps talking. “why would it matter anyway? i’m not in the band. i’m just writing about it.”

“what? who cares about that?” richie turns, awkwardly flinging one gangly leg over the side of the bench so he can look at eddie fully. it’s a lot to handle. “the second bill finds out you can play he’s going to call an emergency band jam to order. i bet you a billion million dollars that i’ll mention one thing about you playing piano and bill will lose his shit, and then demand we all get fucked up together and write a song.” green eyes soften as richie speaks about bill (in that fond way people tended to talk about those they’d loved for many years). “all that kid wants to do is make music with his friends. doesn’t even matter if it’s good. but it will be good,” richie affirms. “because it’s him, and the rest of us, and you.”

eddie’s still stuck on that word — friends. like bill — and richie, and maybe the rest of them — considered him more than just the kid trailing after with his notebook.

“i hate to break it to you,” eddie says eventually, “but i don’t really— i don’t *jam* . i... i perform.”

richie’s cackle is immediate and powerful. “you— i’m sorry, that just — you sound so preten—” eddie pushes richie’s shoulder, hard, because yeah okay it sounded a little pretentious but it was true. ten years of classical training and ruler-slapped knuckles for mistakes didn’t give eddie a lot of time to (as oxymoronic as it was) practice his improv.

“oh fuck you, you know what i meant.”

richie, holding back his laughs, straightens up and tips his nose. “i’m eddie kaspbrak. and i don’t jam... i *perform* .” then he’s collapsing into laughter again and eddie... eddie can’t decide if he’s going to push richie again or laugh along too. so he does both.

they’re still laughing when zuzanna comes in, shark heads bobbing as she walks. “hey guys, time to get lost. we gotta finish setting audio up. there’s a performance tonight!”

richie loses it all over again.

eddie stomps back to the bus, biting his cheek to keep himself from being amused, and leaves a confused looking zuzanna to deal with

richie's shaking form against the keyboard.

da Boss (1:07am)

I cannot BELIEVE you have a crush on richie

eddie (1:07)

literally just finished telling you how annoying he is?? but okay

da Boss (1:07am)

Mhm... why don't you scroll back through our conversations since you started this tour :) Maybe you'll find some patterns :) About how you talk about certain people :) And how often!!

eddie (1:08am)

i DO NOT have a crush on richie

eddie (1:08am)

you're reading too deep into my complaints

da Boss (1:09am)

Tell me again how complaining about his pretty eyes
and smile mean you DON'T think he's hot

eddie (1:09am)

thinking someone is hot is WAY different than
having a crush

eddie (1:10am)

like, yeah, objectively richies cute

eddie (1:10am)

hot

eddie (1:10am)

whatever

eddie (1:13am)

like he's nice to look at! i won't deny that!

eddie (1:15am)

and i'm not the only one who thinks that!!! there are
tons of accounts on twitter saying the same thing.

eddie (1:16am)

actually they say a lot worse.

eddie (1:18am)

someone tweeted him 'give me full-body rug burn' which, imo, is a little much, but it proves that i am not the only one thinking richie tozier is hot!!

eddie (1:21am)

patty?? did you pass out??

a few minutes pass, and patty doesn't answer. fuck. eddie drops his phone to the mattress. it's probably for the best — it's already almost half three in the morning in chicago, and patty might have the weekend off, but that didn't mean she was going to stay up forever just for him. eddie sighs. guess it was just him and his ol' pal insomnia tonight.

bzz bzz.

unknown (1:23am)

shouldn't u be asleep

eddie's brow furrowed. who the fuck?

unknown (1:23am)

[picture image: an entirely unflattering angle of richies face — mostly his nostrils — lit by his phone screen]

eddie snorts. wait. how did richie get his number? eddie supposes he could just roll over and whisper to richie across the walkway, but that would mean actually *talking* to him.

unknown (1:24am)

don't b mad at zuz but i may or may not have used her as a ploy

the *dammit zuzanna* thought is interrupted by another, heavier one. richie wanted his number. probably as a... a purely friendly thing, right? it's just friendship. richie wanted to be eddie's friend, like he'd said earlier, and eddie wanted to be his.

eddie continued to beat that into his head like a square peg into a circular hole as he programmed richie into his contacts.

eddie (1:26am)

i'm trying to sleep

richie (1:26am)

liar

richie (1:26am)

u were just on twitter

eddie (1:27am)

maybe so.

eddie (1:27am)

wait stop looking at my fucking phone screen

eddie turns even further into the corner of his bunk.

richie (1:28am)

where'd u learn to play like that?

richie (1:28am)

seriously

richie (1:28am)

i know u don't "jam" but dude you DO. u fucked that
beethoven up

richie (1:29am)

in a good way

richie (1:32am)

*[picture message: 'alright then, keep your secrets'
screengrab from lord of the rings]*

eddie (1:34am)

ten years of private lessons twice a week and
mandatory 2 hours of practice daily

eddie (1:34am)

followed by 4 years of private lessons twice a month
and a much looser practice schedule

richie (1:35am)

holy FUCL

richie (1:35am)

FUCL

eddie (1:35am)

yeah

richie (1:35am)

FUCK***

eddie (1:36am)

you made it there eventually

richie (1:36am)

ur parents must be crazy to make u practice like that

your parents must be crazy to make you practice like that. eddie stares hard at his phone screen. it's not like richie knew, he couldn't have; eddie just had no fucking clue what to say. *'yeah well when the only thing your grandma seems to love about you is your ability to play piano you tend to throw your whole self into it'* seems like a bit much. *'both my parents are dead'* isn't much better.

da Boss (1:38am)

So sorry for disappearing. I had to have a small freakout because STANLEY URIS FOLLOWED ME ON INSTAGRAM

da Boss (1:38am)

And then HE SENT ME A DM?????????

da Boss (1:38am)

And now WE ARE DMING??? PRESENT TENSE!!!

after eddie's brain catches up, he grins down at his phone.

eddie (1:39am)

he followed me a few days ago

eddie (1:39am)

maybe he saw all my pictures of you and fell in love
;);)

da Boss (1:40am)

Please don't get my hopes up Edward PLEASE

da Boss (1:40am)

He sent me a message about my Planet Earth
soundtrack breakdown and told me I was a genius

richie (1:40am)

sorry if that was too much idk your parents

da Boss (1:40am)

Now we're talking about our favorite nature docs,
Eddie I am going to kiss you when you return

eddie (1:41am) to DA BOSS

please don't

richie (1:41am)

everyone says beep beep richie when my jokes aren't
funny

da Boss (1:42am)

Don't worry babe. Metaphorical kiss. If I can swing
it, these lips will only ever be used for kissing Stan :)

da Boss (1:42am)

I'm going to bed so that I don't say anything I don't
mean to in my sleep-deprived state. Goodnight, good
luck with your crush on Richie, call me tomorrow xx

richie (1:43am)

not that i have ever made a single unfunny joke in
my entire life

eddie (1:44am) to DA BOSS

I DONT HAVE A CRUSH ON RICHIE

eddie (1:44am) to RICHIE

no, my parents were crazy, you're right

eddie (1:44am) to RICHIE

but on the bright side i can play almost any of the top twenty most played classical pieces off the top of my head

eddie (1:44am) to RICHIE

and i work for pitchfork now so how bad can it be?

if richie picks up on the past tense in eddie's text, he doesn't say anything about it, and eddie's grateful for it. it wasn't that eddie was opposed to talking about it — he and bev had circled the tip of the iceberg a few times, apparently sharing similar pasts — but over text at two in the morning didn't strike eddie as the right time.

richie (1:46am)

ya that shits cool and all but theres an even bigger, better bright side

eddie (1:46am)

what, that i'm on tour with shark puppy?

richie (1:47 am)

no

richie (1:47 am)

the bright side is that all of ur piano training resulted in u sleeping directly across from the world's sexiest musician :)

fuck it , eddie thinks, and turns over in bed to flip richie off for real. it's dark so dark eddie can hardly see the long outline of the singer's body under the sheets, but richie brings his phone closer to his face so eddie can just barely see the little wink he sends across the way. flustered, eddie throws a spare pillow across the gap to smack richie in the face and flips back over.

eddie (1:49am)

actually mike is down the hall

richie (1:50am)

goodnite eds :))

eddie wakes up to find his pillow has been returned and that it now smells strongly of richie's stupid strawberry shampoo.

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks again east, mickey, n jack for making my life better.

please know that eddie's hatred for heart and soul comes from a very real place and that place is my piano-teacher-grandmother's soul.

[here's](#) eddie's piano pick & richie's 'improv' was heavily based off [this](#) video.

(fyi all of your comments make my heart go bump bump in the night, i have so much love for all of u.)

5. bill

Summary for the Chapter:

“are— are you seriously asking me what’s wrong with those shoes?” bev looks at bill like he’s grown a second head— or like a woman with a fashion degree and, you know, eyes. “eddie saw those and laughed so hard he had to use his inhaler.”

“you mean that wasn’t an asthma attack?”

Notes for the Chapter:

this chapter is completely dedicated to colen. come get y'all [hanbrough] juice!

PSA the rating of this fic is being changed to E but there wont be explicit content for another few chapters. just keepin y'all on your toes!

[here's](#) the art that inspired the picture i reference in the first paragraph, & [here's](#) the pinterest if you missed last time (with a new section!). also, this chapter contains a recreational weed use/high characters!

october

- colorado

bill stares at the bottom of stan’s bunk. there’s pictures taped up - something to look at as he drifted to sleep every night. a picture of georgie, arm around his girlfriend and face lit up with a laugh; a promotional picture of the band taken at the start of the tour, all of them (ben too) dressed in suits and squished onto a playground slide; a candid bev had snapped when bill passed out against mike’s side after a particularly long night; there was even one of eddie screaming as richie jumper-cabled him backstage. it was a collection of all his

friends - his people - watching over him.

except now each of their faces were covered with a picture of bill mid-sneeze.

there was a note too — *i'm coming for you, bill* — written on a post-it that'd been cut into a heart shape. it was threatening, yes, but only because he knew stan wasn't finished yet. bill sighs.

"shouldn't have eaten his oreos," bev says from her bunk where she's laying on her stomach, flipping idly through a magazine. "you know that's a death sentence."

"i d- *didn't* eat them," bill groans, crawling out from his covers to make sure stan's gone. the bed's empty, like bill knew it'd be; stan had always been an early riser, even with the late nights of tour, and for the past few weeks he'd been getting up even earlier to sit in the kitchenette on his phone. "i was c-c-covering for eddie."

bev turns, gives him a knowing smile. "you big-billed eddie, huh?"

"stan would've k-killed him."

"i dunno," bev says, and her gaze moves down the hall to where bill can faintly hear eddie and richie arguing. "i think he could've handled it." she's probably right, and bill knows it: ever since portland, an entirely new side of eddie had started to appear, like the city had cracked his shell and exposed a firecracker within. there was still hesitancy, obviously, and bill couldn't blame him for that, but whatever shield eddie had been holding up between himself and the members of shark puppy was crumbling a little bit more every day. bill isn't sure what had changed, but he liked to think it was probably him.

"if someone's going to luh-lose an eyebrow, i'd rather it be m-me than him."

"as fair as that is, you can't be eyebrowless and wear those toe-shoes. you'd be laughed off stage every show."

bill's eyebrows furrow. "wuh-what's that supposed to mean? what's wrong with my fivefinger sh-shoes?" bill loves those shoes. they were

new, only purchased last week when stan had used a pair of cooking tongs to pitch bill's old converse out the bus window after claiming they 'smelled like richie when he didn't shower for a month'.

"it was a dare!" richie had said frantically, eyes darting to eddie.

"no one dared you to do that, richie!" stan yelled, bill's shoes still held out the window with the tongs. "we were all just sitting there and you said '*who bets i can go a month without showering*' and then didn't wait for an answer!"

"they d-don't smell that bad," bill said, attempting to wriggle out of where mike — *et tu, brute?* — was holding him back. "stan, please, those are m-my only shoes!"

"i'm doing this for your own good. and for the nostrils of everyone on this bus." and then he'd let go, leaving bill's shoes on the side of some road in utah, never to be seen again. ben, after taking pity on bill (despite doing nothing to stop the disposal) had asked the driver to take them to the nearest mall. bill had morosely picked out a new pair of converse and the fivefingers.

"are— are you seriously asking me what's wrong with those shoes?" bev looks at bill like he's grown a second head— or like a woman with a fashion degree and, you know, eyes. "eddie saw those and laughed so hard he had to use his inhaler."

"you mean that wasn't an asthma attack?"

bev starts saying something about "have you even checked twitter in the last two days" but bill's saved from the conversation by a loud *boom* and a vibration that shakes the entire bus. bill's legs go wobbly as the entire vehicle lurches hard to the right, and he slams against the side of bev's bed before flying forward into the wall. a voice — ben's? their bus driver conrad? — from the front of the bus calls out

"hold on!"

there's another sharp movement that sends bill stumbling forward and bev's magazine flying off onto the floor before the bus gradually slows down and pulls off to the side of the road. ben comes bursting

through the separation slider.

“are you guys okay?”

“yuh-yeah,” bill says breathlessly at the same time bev says “what the fuck was that?”

“i think a tire blew.” ben’s eyes are wild and he’s already calling — someone, bill didn’t know who — as he waves them on. “c’mon, i think we should get off.”

bev hops off her bunk and they follow ben off the bus to join the rest of the group outside staring at the rear tire. or, well, what the rear tire used to be.

“ho-holy shit,” bill breathes, and wraps his arms around himself because it’s getting chilly and he’s only wearing his pajamas.

“yeah,” richie answers, looking a little thrown despite the words that follow. “that tire blew harder than eddie’s mom.” simultaneously, bev and eddie thwack richie on the arm. bill turns to mike, who always seemed to gravitate to his side.

“what happened t-to you?” bill asks, noting mike’s wet shirt. mike grimaces.

“i *was* enjoying a nice bowl of cereal. was.” bill tries to be sympathetic, but mike looks so grumpy about it that bill has difficulty holding back his smile. mike holds onto his grumpiness for a solid 2.6 seconds before he’s smiling right back. “oh, be quiet.”

“i d-didn’t say anything!”

ben re-joins them a few minutes later, looking a little less frantic and a lot more defeated.

“as you can all see,” he starts, shoving his phone back in his pocket. “the bus is going to need a little bit of work before it gets back on the road.”

“what about the show? are we even going to be able to make it there by tonight?” stan’s arms are crossed and he looks a little nervous.

they'd never missed a show, and bill hopes they never will.

"the crew bus is turning around now. it'll be a little crowded, but we'll pack the rest of the instruments and you guys onto it and you'll make it to the venue in plenty of time." ben shakes his head. "but this bus isn't going to make it to the city until tomorrow."

"where are we going to sleep?" eddie asks, and oh, right, bill hadn't even thought of that.

"colleen had hotel rooms booked for you guys." ben turns to eddie. "i hope you don't mind sharing with someone— the company only wanted to drop enough for three rooms." it also meant three of them would be put in a room together, if bill's incredibly basic understanding of math was right.

"oh, he doesn't mind," richie beams, swinging an arm around eddie's shoulder. "eddie would love to share a room with me." eddie's making a face like actually, he does mind, so bill goes to save him but stan speaks up instead.

"then i'm sharing with mike and bill," stan decides, and then says something under his breath that makes bev snort and nod her head.

"who said m-me and mike are sharing?"

everyone but mike, who's smiling down at his milk-soaked shirt, gives him a look.

"wh-what?"

"well ben," bev says, moving on. "guess that means you're stuck with me." bill doesn't think ben would ever refer to spending time with bev as *'being stuck with her'* — especially not if the sheepish look he's sporting is anything to go by.

"it would be an honor, miss marsh."

they do make it to the venue on time, and they proceed to absolutely kick ass (even though bill stumbles over a few words after his eyes catch on a fan's sign that reads *fuck me with your toeshoes on*) at the show that night. and, god, that's a thing now, the signs. bill thought that stuff was reserved for bands like one direction or... whatever other boy bands were popular enough to get that kind of attention.

it wasn't just signs, either: the entire band had gained thousands more followers on twitter and instagram (though for whatever reason richie had gained the most and he refused to let anyone forget that). even ben's accounts were blowing up, though that probably had to do with the fact beverly had dragged him on-stage the night of his birthday so the audience could sing to him. he'd stood there, flushed as red as beverly's hair, and the next morning he'd woken up to a hoard of new (and incredibly thirsty) followers.

shark puppy is moving forward at monumental speed with no signs of stopping; bill still feels like pinching himself after every show.

after their encore they all pile into the uber ben had ordered for them to head back to the hotel; it's a van, but they're still one seat short, so richie ends up pulling eddie (who turns vividly red) into his lap.

"isn't this nice, eds?"

"no," eddie says flatly, and refuses to look at anything but the back of the driver's seat the entire trip. bev and stan can't stop giggling to themselves.

"wuh-what's so funny?" bill whispers to mike where they're sat in the back seat.

mike pats bill's knee and shakes his head.

"bill — and i say this with love — you are the most oblivious fuckin' person i know."

they pull up to the hotel and eddie's the first out of the car, springing out of richie's lap like he'd been sitting in a plate of lava. bill's out last, and when he sees the hotel in front of him, his eyes widen.

"h-h-holy shit," he murmurs, and the others echo his awe.

“i understand why they didn’t want to pay for more rooms,” stan says. the hotel is huge, and gorgeous, and there’s fucking *doormen* waiting outside.

“bougie,” richie comments, and then turns to them all with a wide grin. “let’s go fuck shit up.”

“i d-don’t have very long,” bill tells the tiny georgie staring up from his phone screen. “ri-richie says he’s got a surprise for us. but i wuh-wanted to call you while i had stable wifi.” bill had already texted georgie about the tire blowing earlier, and promised to call when they got to the hotel.

“that’s okay,” georgie says through a yawn, because fuck, bill forgot about time differences again. georgie perks up a little, though, and his face gets bigger as the phone gets closer to his face. “dude, you’ll never guess what happened to me today.”

“what?”

“six more girls tried to get your number from me today.” bill groans, and georgie grins. georgie has always been popular — a stark contrast to bill’s verified ‘loser’ status since the age of forever. shark puppy’s debut has given bill a chance to give georgie a run for his money, even if the loser-ness is ingrained in him forever, and yet georgie still manages to reap the benefits. bill would feel sorry that georgie was getting harrassed like this if georgie wasn’t so damn smug about it.

“wh-what’d you tell them?”

“that you were too busy being in love with mik—” the rest of georgie’s sentence is drowned out as bill shoves his phone into the covers, hoping mike couldn’t hear any of the conversation from where he was shaving in the bathroom.

“georgie i sw-swear i’ll kill you,” bill threatens when he brings the

phone back to his face. georgie doesn't look scared in the slightest. in fact, he looks downright devious.

"are you sharing a room with him again?" bill doesn't answer right away, though the look on his brother's face tells him georgie already knows the answer.

"y-yeah. and stan, too!" he doesn't mention that stan's only rooming with them because they were short a room. he also doesn't mention that, because there were three of them instead of two, mike and bill were going to be sharing a bed tonight.

(the thought alone turns bill's stomach inside out and upside-down; they've shared a bed before but that doesn't mean bill will ever get used to waking up to a slumbering adonis).

"yeah but you're not in love wi—"

"guh-goodbye! gotta go! i'm hanging up now!" bill has to tap his phone screen a few times to get the buttons to show up again (he'll never fully understand technology). the last thing bill hears before he manages to hang up is georgie's laugh and *wait, i haven't made fun of your toe shoes yet!*

bill shoots off a quick 'love u' text because it feels wrong to end a conversation without it before he goes to stand in the doorway of the bathroom.

"yuh-you ready to go?"

mike's splashing water over his face so he doesn't answer right away. bill, being the kind and devoted friend he is, watches as droplets slide across the strong cut of his jaw, and then, when he stands, the way they trickle down his neck and chest. you know, just, uh, making sure he doesn't drown, or something.

"yeah, let me throw a shirt on." yes. a shirt. bill realizes he's staring at mike's bare chest and flicks his eyes up; mike looks down at him, amused for whatever reason. "you're gonna have to move in order for me to—"

"yeah, s-sorry, i—" bill steps out of the way and he can feel the heat

rising in his cheeks. saving himself the embarrassment of being caught staring again, bill stands by the door until mike's fully dressed and they head over to richie's together.

"sounds like you were having a good call with georgie," mike grins, and bill thanks god for richie tozier (a rare, rare occurrence) when he swings the hotel door open before bill has to come up with a response.

"welcome to casa de richie y spaghetti man," richie bellowed into the hallway, and eddie called out *stop calling me that* from somewhere in the room. "please, come in."

they're the last ones there, so richie tells everyone to shut up (even though no one was talking) and pulls out a gift bag.

"i've gathered you all here this fine friday evening to—" bev starts booing half-way through richie's sentence.

"what's in the fucking bag, richie?" stan calls out, and richie huffs.

"fine, ruin the drama of it all. friends, bandmates, angry journalist, i just want to say..." richie reaches into the bag and holds up a smaller, clear one instead. "welcome to colorado."

it's weed. a lot of weed. a joint for each of them, bill counts, if any of them past richie, mike, and bev had the tolerance. eddie's eyebrows were so high they looked like they were about to jump ship and run away, so bill guessed he wasn't an avid smoker either. they all cheer and crowd around richie to check out the goods anyway; a break was in high demand after the stress of the day.

eddie's still sitting on the bed looking incredibly nervous, so bill breaks away from where richie's passing out joints like party favors and flops down next to him.

"yuh-you don't have to if you d-don't want to," bill offers. eddie shakes his head.

"it's not that — i mean, thank you, i just." eddie lowers his voice, his eyes wide. "i've never smoked marijuana before."

somehow, it makes sense. bill puts a hand on eddie's shoulder. "w-we can teach you, if you want. or yuh-you can just hang out with us, there's no pressure to—"

"c'mon, lads!" richie calls, and he opens the door to their balcony (this hotel had fucking balconies?!) "there's weed to be smoked!" everyone files outside, and richie waits, staring at eddie and bill. or maybe, bill thinks, just eddie. "you coming, spaghetti?" yeah, maybe just eddie.

"yes," eddie says with conviction — a lot more brave than he'd seemed a few seconds ago — and he walks over to where richie's holding the door. "if you'll teach me."

richie looks like he's died and gone to heaven. okay, maybe richie was flirting with eddie more than he flirted with everyone else.

"the easiest way to get started," richie preaches once they're all outside, "is to shotgun."

"isn't that for beers?" eddie asks.

mike lets out a lungful of smoke, already partly finished with his joint. "it's for both. it's like— here, i can show you." and then, to bill's horror, mike turns to him. "would you do me the honor, bill?"

bill nods, knowing if he tries to speak his voice won't work. he watches with big eyes as mike pulls from the joint, gaze stuck to mike's mouth like glue. such pretty lips, his brain screams, like bill doesn't already know; like bill doesn't spend all his free time memorizing and re-memorizing every plane of skin, every eyelash, every curve of muscle. mike's lips crook into a little smile and then he's leaning in, half an inch — no, a quarter — from bill's lips. mike's so fucking close that their noses are touching, and if bill leaned forward just a hair, their lips would be too. for a moment, bill forgets what he's supposed to be doing, but there's smoke curling around his face and oh, right. bill breathes in as mike breathes out, his lungs filling with smoke and his heart thumping against his chest.

when they pull away and bill lets it all out again, he knows his face is burning. he also knows mike is standing there staring, but bill can't

think about it or his brain might melt out his ears.

“s-s-s-so yeah,” bill squeaks, avoiding stan’s knowing gaze. “that’s shotgunning.”

they sat out there until the joints were, for the most part, finished, until they were all shivering in the october chill and ben forced them all back inside before they all caught colds. now they’re laid out on the beds, and the floor, and stan’s draped over the desk chair laughing at his own joke. bill is... very high. well, they’re all high, obviously — eddie included. he’d let richie shotgun him, and when richie had pulled back, eddie had looked... probably exactly how bill did after mike had done it to him.

“hey,” mike mumbles, sprawled out on the ground beside where bill’s leaning against the foot of eddie’s bed. “you wanna go swimming?”

it takes a long time for bill’s brain to process the question — mostly because he forgets that mike asked him a question in the first place — but he gets there eventually. “wuh-where?”

“the pool. it’s on the first floor, next to the lobby.” mike pushes himself up so he’s sitting, too: shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip with bill. “we passed it on our way in.”

“i d-didn’t bring my swimsuit,” bill says, lips drawing into a pout. so *stupid*. how could he have forgotten a swimsuit? well, he hadn’t known there would be a pool — actually, did he even bring a swimsuit on tour at all? he vaguely remembers considering it, holding his trunks up as he packed and deciding whether it was worth it to pack them just in case. georgie had called him stupid for even considering it — *it’s going to be winter, you’re living on a bus, when would you ever* — but now look. man, if georgie were here, bill would—

“neither did i,” mike shrugs, pulling bill from his thoughts. “i’m sure

we'll figure something out."

stan's still laughing to himself, mumbling something about *kookie kookie lend me your bones* in between spurts of giggles, and richie and eddie are having a very heated argument about whether or not hot dogs were sandwiches, but bev and ben wave goodnight as they leave.

"where are you guys going?" bev asks, hand stuffed in a half-empty bag of pretzel sticks. there're crumbs all over the bed between her and ben, but it's not like it's bill's house. even if it was, he wouldn't give a shit.

"swuh-swimming," bill manages. "you w-want to come?"

"nah," bev shakes her head, stacks another pretzel stick on the pyramid she's building on ben's stomach. "ben says he's got somethin' important to tell me, so i think we'll stay here." bill's desperate to know what the important thing is, but he's also kind of desperate for a burrito, so he doesn't worry about it much.

the elevator feels like a rollercoaster and bill really, really wants to press all the buttons just to see them light up — he doesn't think mike would stop him, either — but he also really, really wants to get in the pool before he's fifty. so he holds back, just barely.

the concierge desk is empty but there's still a chance they might run into someone so bill walks very casually — so casual, look at him being casual and cool and not high at all — in front of mike, who's snickering for some reason. the pool's empty too, and there's a sign that says no swimming past midnight, but the door's still unlocked so they go in anyway.

the scent of chlorine hits like a slap to the face but bill doesn't mind, gets used to it quickly. georgie used to swim, before he found out he was leagues (haha) better at baseball, and bill would always go with him to practices. bill would sit on the bleachers and draw as georgie swam laps; back and forth and back and forth. this pool didn't have lanes like that one, though. it was a normal pool, with no ropes or diving boards or screaming coaches. just blue, blue water, and him, and mike.

“hey,” mike calls, and bill must’ve been spacing off hard because when he turns mike’s already stripped down and standing under the fuzzy lights in only a pair of yellow boxer-briefs.

bill chokes, just a little.

“you coming or what?” bill nods. mike doesn’t look away. okay, cool. bill’s elbows get caught up when he tries to take off his shirt but he manages it eventually, and he forgets about his shoes until his pants are already around his ankles, but after some finagling bill’s able to get it all off without falling over.

“nice boxers,” mike teases, and when bill looks down he sees — oh, god, *really?* — that he’s wearing the unicorn print pair georgie’d given to him as a gag gift the year before.

“th-thanks,” he says anyway, because he doesn’t think his brain could form anything else coherent, and then he takes a running jump into the pool so he can’t feel the weight of mike’s gaze anymore.

for one, blissful moment, bill is floating, floating, floating. everything drops away as his head goes under: there’s no sound, no light, nothing but the cool water wrapping around him and settling against his skin. there’s a distant echo, like mike’s jumped in too, and before bill breaks through the surface tension again, before he stretches out his legs to stand on the concrete of the pool floor, he tastes the chlorine in his smile.

“thought i was gonna have to figure out mouth to mouth there for a second,” mike jokes when bill finally emerges. that’s... that sure is a thought. bill’s head feels too full to compute it.

“c-can you imagine the headlines? sh-shark puppy tour bus blows tire, luh-lead guitarist drowns in hotel p-pool.” he wonders briefly, morbidly, what picture they’d use. hopefully not the one of him mid-sneeze.

“nah, i’d never let you die, big bill.” mike’s a lot closer now. not too close — not so close it makes bill’s chest ache — but close enough that bill could reach out and wipe the water droplets from his forehead. bill really, really would like to do that. it doesn’t even

make sense: his hand is wet too, and it would just leave mike wetter than before. but he wants to. he wants to touch mike all the time, anywhere, for any reason. “not if i could help it.”

“if i d-die,” bill starts, and mike grins.

“if.”

“if i die,” bill repeats, and he’s grinning too. “p-please don’t let richie make a bill d-deadbrough joke.” mike nods and traces his finger in a cross over his heart — all very serious, despite the very not-serious expression he wears. “and m-make sure there’s good food.”

“what would you say is good food, huh?”

“cheeto pu-uffs,” bill decides. his stomach grumbles at the thought, but the feeling is buried under the one that blooms when mike throws his head back and laughs.

“you got it. anything for you,” mike murmurs softly, and bill thinks the funeral might come sooner than either of them expected. he’s dying, he’s *dead*, and it’s all mike and his beautiful self’s fault. bill wants to say i’d do anything for you too but in the haze of weed and heart-eyes the wires get a little mixed up.

“your arms are so b-big,” he says, like an idiot. and then, like a bigger idiot, he reaches out and wraps his hand around the dark skin of mike’s muscle. “strong.”

“it’s all the farm work.” to bill’s disdain (and delight) mike flexes. *please, god, bill thinks, give me a break.* “you’d be surprised how heavy some of those sheep are.” bill believes him. actually, bill’s not really thinking about farm work right now. or sheep, though his brain desperately tries to drag him down that path. he’s thinking about mike.

surprise surprise.

bill doesn’t know what he’s doing — or maybe he does, maybe he’s just too high to care right now — when his hand starts to move. across mike’s shoulder, slower than molasses, over his collarbone, softer than a sunrise, until his palm presses solidly against mike’s

chest, fingers fanned out. if bill waits long enough, if he focuses hard enough, he'll feel mike's heart beating. maybe it's beating as hard as bill's is.

"bill," mike says, and his eyelids are heavy, and his face is close, and bill's thinking fuck it, maybe this isn't one-sided, maybe i'll just—

"excuse me!" bill whips around (or, well, as best as he can whip around against the pressure of the water) and distances himself from mike as the uniformed woman comes in. "excuse me, you can't be in here, it's after hours!"

"sorry, we were just leaving!" mike calls out, and bill's already crawling up the ladder and scooping his clothes up against his wet torso.

"oh my god," the girl says, and her tone's gone all weird and high-pitched. "bill denbrough?"

"y-yes?" bill has never met this woman, he's sure of it. even after his eyes drop to her nametag, he's clueless. actually, bill doesn't think he's ever met a sophie in his life.

"and mike hanlon too, oh my god. i'm a huge fan. i love shark puppy!" oh. right. for a moment, bill was so high (on weed? on mike?) he forgot he was in his own band. "can i get a picture with you? please?" she's already got her phone out; there's no escape.

bill and mike lean in beside her as she takes the selfie and bill just hopes his eyes aren't too red. and that his boxers weren't showing. and that she didn't see him feeling up his bassist.

not that he was feeling up his bassist.

they walk to the elevator dripping wet and leave sophie to freak out alone by the pool, and bill to freak out with his best friend in a big metal box. the urge to press all the buttons isn't quite as overwhelming anymore, but bill's fingers still twitch around his bundle of clothes.

"you think the hotel staff are gonna be mad about this?" mike jokes, nodding toward the puddles that had formed on the tile beneath their

feet.

“p-probably.” bill looks at mike then, for the first time since the pool. mike’s eyes are a lot less heady now, but just as deep, and bill still feels that swoop in his gut. “but this is what *rockstars* do, right? fuck around after d-dark? do drugs on the b-balcony? mess up hot-hotels?”

“well damn. i guess we really are rockstars now, huh?” they laugh, quiet in the early hours; true rockstars could still be courteous to their neighbors. bill gives in and reaches out to swipe his hand across the buttons of the floors they’d already passed. it was two in the morning — who was going to care?

when they get back to their room, bill’s hit with a wave of exhaustion so strong he can barely keep his eyes open while he’s changing.

“come on, bill,” mike whispers, ushering him to the bed. “you’re sleeping on your feet like a horse.” bill makes it into bed, can half-feel as the mattress dips when mike crawls in the other side, but it’s only a few seconds before bill’s out cold.

bill dreams of sheep, and of strong, safe arms.

Notes for the Chapter:

a fun little game of spot the brokeback mountain quote.

all of my uwus go to mickey, jack, and east. this fic would be nothing without you

also!!! thank you to all of you who take the time to comment on this fic. i can't express how much your kind words mean to me, seriously. i read every single comment, even if i don't get the chance to reply to you. i would never be able to complete this fic without y'all cheering me on, so BIG LOVE to u guys.

6. eddie

Summary for the Chapter:

“you give me a headache.”

jesus. eddie’s still staring craters in the table but he can feel, he can fucking feel the smirk richie’s wearing. “you know, there’s a really good home remedy for headaches.”

don’t engage don’t engage don’t engage “oh?”

“yep,” richie says, all smug and teasing and a lot closer than he was before. a large hand splays over the table and eddie knows he’s standing right fucking behind him: the heat from richie’s body is radiating outward, warming eddie from the bottom of his spine to the dip of his collarbone with how richie was starting to lean closer. “best way to get rid of a headache is a nice, slow, fu—”

Notes for the Chapter:

someone tell me that writing mosd isnt a personality trait, quick before i do something stupid and finish the whole thing this weekend!!

this chapter goes out to all fellow bev/eddie friendship lovers.

**cw for vague mentions of abuse again.

late october

- texas

it’s an unspoken thing, but eddie knows. eddie knows about stanley and patty’s texting (and calling and snapchatting and facetimeing).

eddie's pretty sure that stanley knows eddie knows about stanley and patty's texting. so eddie knows that stanley knows that eddie knows about stanley and patty's texting. at least, eddie thinks he knows he knows he knows. right?

the point is, eddie knows, and so does stan, and every morning they sit in the breakfast nook together pretending like they aren't both texting the same person.

this morning isn't any different: eddie's always been an early riser, beaten into him by his grandmother and reinforced by university, so he rolls off his bunk (gracefully avoiding ben's meaty arm hanging over the side of the bed below) at seven a.m. the siren call of coffee was nigh impossible to resist, especially when the nights seem to get later and later.

stumbling into the kitchen with sleep-wobbled legs, eddie finds that everything is in its place: the coffee is fresh and ready, the curtains are open to let in the morning light, and stan is curled up in the corner of the booth, eyes glued to where his fingers fly across the screen.

"morning, stan," eddie says as he crosses to the coffee maker. there's a mug set out already; that's part of the routine, too. at some point, it'd become an unspoken rule for whoever woke first to leave a mug out for the other: a simple blue one for stan, and one that read *grumpy fuckers club* — a gift from richie that, for whatever reason, eddie had simply forgotten to throw away.

stan doesn't look up from his phone. "good morning," he replies coolly. nothing to hide here. no flirtatious texts to your best friend. everything's business as usual.

eddie was going to crack stan if it was the last thing he did.

"read any interesting articles this morning?" he asks, and that has stan's eyebrow raising because they didn't usually talk past the initial greeting. it was *morning*, *morning*, and then they drank their coffee and scrolled through their respective twitters in silence. sometimes stan would snort at a meme and slide his phone across the table for eddie to snort at too, and sometimes eddie would send stan the link

to whatever bizarre news story had popped up on his timeline. it was just routine, and now eddie was breaking it.

stan shakes his head. keeps it casual. “nope,” he says, popping the p. eddie narrows his eyes as he sits in the booth across from the keyboardist. his small hands wrap around the oversized mug, the contents heating his chilled fingers.

“see any good memes?”

“nah.”

“what about—”

stan clears his throat, eyes leveling eddie with a challenging stare. “eddie.”

eddie takes a long, indulgent drink of his coffee because he could play this game, too. “yes, stanley?” at first, stan’s flat, odd sense of humor and masterful technique of the stare-down had intimidated the ever-living jesus out of eddie; the oreo incident hadn’t helped. slowly, though, eddie understood the other sides to stan: the giggly-high stan, the two-sugars-and-a-dash-of-cream stan, the owns-the-collector’s-edition-of-both-planet-earth-documentaries stan, the cried-after-watching-princess-diaries stan. the absolutely-secretly-dating-eddie’s-best-friend stan.

eddie has gotten to know a lot of stanley uris, and he’s decided he likes him quite a bit. not as much as patty, obviously, but. quite a bit.

“just ask .”

now, prompted, eddie isn’t sure what to say. what does he want to know? he’d gotten vague responses from patty, things along the lines of we’re talking or things are going well, but never a label or any concrete answers. stan’s phone buzzes in his hand and his fingers twitched like he aches to swipe open the screen and see what had come through. eddie softens.

“she’s amazing, isn’t she?” it’s not the question eddie was meaning to ask, but it’s the one he means. stan doesn’t even look thrown; a smile

melts over his face, something soft and warm and not at all for eddie.

“extraordinary,” stan says quietly, and that’s the end of it. they go back to their coffee (and back to texting patty).

eddie (7:11am)

you better be coming to the chicago show

da Boss (7:11am)

I bought my tickets before you even got the gig, kid.
Stanley Uris has owned my heart since I heard the
first note of Holy Ghost

eddie (7:12am)

thank you for your undying support patty

da Boss (7:13am)

Anything for you Stan <3

eddie (7:13am)

WRONG CHAT

da Boss (7:14am)

; -)

richie (7:16am)

egg

eddie (7:16am)

use your words

richie (7:16am)

egg

eddie (7:17am)

i'm not entertaining this

richie (7:17am)

pls....egg.....im dying..... need egg.....maybe
bacon....

eddie (7:20am)

there are six other people on this bus you can text
with your breakfast demands

richie (7:20am)

and yet

eddie briefly wonders how difficult it would be to change his phone number at this point in his career. he'd have to email all the connects he'd built up, and file the proper paperwork at pitchfork (and wilma was never happy to see anyone, let alone someone with a thick stack of paperwork to go through), and—

“alright everyone, your days can begin now. i'm awake.” richie lets the separation panel slide shut with a snap, clearly having no consideration for the rest of the band still sleeping behind it, and waltzes into the kitchen. eddie becomes very, very interested in tracing the scrapes in the wood table.

“i think,” stan says, scooching out of the booth. “i'm going to go... anywhere but here.”

“goodnight, stanley!” richie calls. stan flips him off without looking and disappears into the bunks, much more gentle with the way he lets the slider close. “he's so cranky in the mornings.”

“you give me a headache.”

jesus. eddie's still staring craters in the table but he can feel, he can fucking *feel* the smirk richie's wearing. “you know, there's a really good home remedy for headaches.”

don't engage don't engage don't engage “oh?”

“yep,” richie says, all smug and teasing and a lot closer than he was before. a large hand splays over the table and eddie knows he's standing right fucking behind him: the heat from richie's body is radiating outward, warming eddie from the bottom of his spine to the dip of his collarbone with how richie was starting to lean closer. “best way to get rid of a headache is a nice, slow, fu— *oof*.”

eddie slides out of the booth and escapes from under richie's towering body, accidentally-on-purpose throwing an elbow in the vague direction of richie's stomach. “maybe i just need some food,” eddie proposes, ignoring the snicker from behind him. the snicker that turns choked and fizzles into a strange, broken whimper. he

turns around to find that richie is point-blank open-mouthed staring at eddie's legs.

“what the fuck are those,” he asks weakly, a thin finger pointing to eddie's pajama shorts. “who let you bring w.m.d's on this bus?”

“they're just shorts, richie.”

“yeah they're fucking short all right!” richie's voice is tight. eddie bites his cheek, hard, trying to hold back the satisfaction that threatens to wash over his face. yeah, technically eddie isn't supposed to be fucking around with richie (*your co-worker* , sting's voice reverberates in his head) but there's no rule against accidental flirting. purely accidental.

eddie bends down to get a frying pan from the cabinet below the sink and there was a crash, a groan, and a muttered '*jesus fuck*' from behind him.

completely and totally accidental.

“everything okay?” eddie asks innocently when he stands back up. richie doesn't answer, just stands there looking dazed and pissed off and pink all over.

“i need to just... not see for awhile,” richie says, voice strained as he pushes his glasses up into his mess of curls. “maybe i should go back to bed for a bit.”

richie staggers back toward his bed, and eddie whistles to himself all the way through breakfast.

“whatcha' writing, eddie?” bev flops down onto the green room's couch, hard enough to make eddie bounce a little bit where he's curled up in the corner with his notepad. she leans over his shoulder to see, short red curls clipped back with little 'fuck you' pins, but the page is blank. flip back a sheet or two and she might catch a glimpse

of richie's name mentioned a few (thousand) times, but when the door to the green room opened eddie had turned the pages so fast they'd almost ripped out. "oof. still nothing?"

"almost three months and i still don't even have a direction for this thing. i mean, i know i'm supposed to be writing about you guys, obviously, yeah. but like." eddie, a god damned *writer*, couldn't find the words he needed to describe the dilemma he'd been grappling with since the beginning. he makes a frustrated noise as filler, and bev makes a face like she gets it. bev always just got it.

"you're taking notes, right?"

eddie nods. just because bev doesn't know what they say doesn't mean she didn't see him writing them. but what if they weren't on the right things? what if at the end of this five months, eddie looks down at a notebook full of tozierisms and a pink slip. this isn't the kind of writing eddie is used to, even if he has the basic understanding of it from his college courses. technical, passionate, musical, fucking critical writing — he knew he was good at that. the rest of all this... it's uncharted waters, and eddie is already on the brink of losing his readers. the only people who had ever listened to him.

"then that's enough." bev's voice is earnest and her face is set, green eyes so sure eddie thinks she'd convince anyone. "you're doing all you can do by writing *something* down. the story will write itself, you just have to put the words down." she smiles then, something teasing and bright, as she reaches out to tap the blank page. "unless you're just drawing hearts around the names of the band members you think are cutest."

eddie rolls his eyes, but there's a smile on his face too and a lightness to his heart that hadn't been there before. *it's enough. you're doing what you can.* eddie chooses to let the cute band members comment slide; he doesn't want to think about why beverly's eyes look so damn mischievous — like she knows something. there wasn't anything to know, but her eyes said the opposite. "let's hope so, or my boss will have me sliced, diced, marinated, and fried. this is huge for the company too. you— your audience is really invested in you, and growing like crazy."

“don’t think about it,” bev says, and nudges him. “seriously. just keep writing whatever feels right. the story will happen. and if not, you’ll just have to come on tour with us and try again.” it’s a joke, and they both laugh, but bev also... kinda sounds like she might mean it. maybe what she means is that by the next one, they’ll still talk: they’ll still be friends. “you could take richie’s place.”

eddie snorts. “i don’t think i have enough stage presence to fill richie’s spot,” he jokes. “and my grandma would never approve of—” eddie clears his throat, realizing what kind of words were threatening to crawl out of his throat. there was no going back, but eddie would take another route; he’ll have to work for the rest of his life to keep her grip on him from taking hold again. “she’d roll in her grave if she ever knew i was in a rock band.” bev pulls her knees up to her chest, pushing her big black boots into the leather of the couch.

“all the more reason to do it, right?” bev’s eyes drop to her knees and she shrugs. “my dad never wanted me to cut my hair. or wear too much makeup, or pierce my ears. definitely not my nose,” she adds, and reaches up to adjust the little metal piece back to center. “so i did all of it anyway. don’t get me wrong, i would’ve done it all anyway because i fucking wanted to, but it was like... like a bonus. every time i did something i wanted, i also got to whisper to myself *fuck you, dad.* ” she huffs out a laugh. it should be bitter — eddie’s picked up enough pieces of the puzzle bev’s hinted at in their conversations, and he knows bev’s father wasn’t anything a father should be. their pasts are vastly different, but painfully similar. “i got my acceptance letter to FIT the same month he passed away. it was like cosmic retribution in the form of following a dream he would’ve never supported.”

“when i found out my grandmother died, i hung up the phone and went directly to the admissions office and changed my major,” eddie says. percy had been there when it happened, sitting in their freshman dorm eating a push pop and pretending like he wasn’t eavesdropping. “the first thing i did. i said ‘thank you, have a nice a day’ and i left my apartment immediately. i know it sounds weird, but bev—” eddie picks at the corner of his notepad, sliding his fingernail across the edge of the paper. “it was one of the happiest days of my life. i felt like i— it felt like after all those years i could

finally let everything that happened— i could let it all out.”

“like you could breathe again,” bev says, and when eddie looks at her he knows she understands.

“like i was free.”

“yeah.” bev smiles with heavy eyes and a kind of old-souled sadness eddie caught glances of in the mirror. she reaches over and squeezes his hand, and they sit there for a moment not saying anything else; wherever sonia and elvira and beverly’s dad were, they weren’t here. they didn’t get to have a say ever again.

“for what it’s worth,” bev continues when she pulls her hand back to her own lap. “i think you’d be a great addition to any rock band. just ‘cause you haven’t tried it doesn’t mean you’d be bad.” she taps the toe of her giant boot against eddie’s leg. “and you definitely have stage presence. we get performances of your arguments with richie every day.”

“richie has a lot of annoying things to say,” eddie sniffs defensively, and even if it’s nice to change the subject he wishes it didn’t have to be changed to *this* . “and i have a lot to say back.” it’s completely fair! richie started the arguments by being wrong, and eddie engaged in them because it is his duty as a decent person to inform richie of just how wrong he is and tell him how to not be so wrong in the future. eddie was *teaching* ; he was performing a public service.

bev grins. “there’s a word for it, i think,” she says, her face turned teasingly questioning. “hmm.. flirting, maybe?” eddie scoffs, a big ol’ *puh-shaw* with too much force; too big, too loud, too obvious. yes, it had been accepted and filed away long ago that richie was, for some yet-to-be-understood reason, unbearably attractive in almost every way to eddie and yes, eddie might let himself quietly flirt with richie because of it, but he isn’t that obvious, is he?

“there is no way that— absolutely not,” he lies through his teeth, knowing full well bev is smarter than that. “i’d rather chop off my own hands and never be able to play piano again than sleep with richie tozier.”

bev smirks, and eddie feels like he's cornered himself. "so you've thought about it?"

"no!" he's never thought about sleeping with richie or anything — truly, it's never even crossed his mind; not even when richie walked around the tour bus shirtless, or when he walked around the venues shirtless, or when he sent eddie shirtless snapchats from the other room asking eddie to bring him the box of hoho's from the kitchenette. eddie also did *not* think about sleeping with richie after a show when richie came off the stage sweaty and adrenaline-filled and wearing that giddy smile — but that was a whole different conversation. "i have never thought about fucking richie goddamn tozi—"

the door to the greenroom swings open with a bang and richie walks in, nothing but trouble camouflaged with dangerous smiles and long legs. eddie hates him; eddie hates that he *wants* him. "well, if it isn't little eddie spaghetti. should've known it'd be you talking about me." there's a wink, but eddie looks down and busies himself with his notebook; he can feel the *told-you-so* vibes from bev rolling over him in waves.

"hi richie," bev drawls.

"beverly, darling, hello!" richie, upon seeing that the only seat next to eddie is occupied, pulls up a chair to the end of the couch and straddles it. eddie can count on one hand the amount of times richie has ever managed to sit in a chair properly. "please tell me britt got back to you on whether or not jones' barbecue delivers." the bodyguard, who'd been added to the crew after a fan had managed to sneak onto a tour bus during one of the shows, had been talking about the pulled pork from this place since the moment they drove over texas state line. eddie doesn't even care about barbecue, but at this point britt has talked it up so much that even *he* was desperate to try it for himself.

"they don't," bev sighs, disappointed, and she lets richie make a big show of throwing his head back and groaning before she adds. "so britt drove out to pick it up for us instead. she'll be back in like twenty minutes with food for the whole crew."

the sound richie makes is close to pornographic. eddie wishes he could unhear things: mainly that. he and bev's face both pinch up in disgust, which probably only fuels whatever sick part of richie that makes him do those kinds of things.

"whatcha' working on there, spaghetti?" richie asks, leaning over into eddie's space to see his notepad. eddie pulls the paper away. that just makes it worse — richie follows, even closer now. "you writing me love letters?"

"in your *dreams* , tozier." richie makes a kissy noise before pulling away, letting eddie relax. faster than eddie can process, richie reaches out and swipes the notebook. "hey, give it back!"

"dear diary," richie mocks, mimicking eddie in a high-pitched, vaguely irish voice that sounds nothing like him as he pretends to read. "today richie said hi to me. he is sooo cute and all i want is for him to stick his—" eddie throws himself off the couch and dives at richie, who goes down with an undignified squawk.

when britt comes in, hands full of heavenly-smelling barbecue, eddie's attempting to army crawl away from richie's tickle attack, and bev is scrolling through her phone, pretending they don't exist.

"do i even want to know what's—" britt wonders, and bev cuts her off with a resounding "nope."

the thing about your demons is that sometimes they get stronger when you say their names.

maybe talking with bev earlier had summoned her; pulled her from the grave and led her to eddie in the night. even with all the power eddie took back when she died, he can never keep her from his nightmares.

he is alone and he is afraid, running through hallways that never seem to end. he is crying out, begging: *please, someone help, please* .

he is a boy, *please* , he is just a little boy who runs and runs and runs when he knows it is useless; he runs, but she chases faster.

“eddie,” sonia calls — no, nana — no, sonia — no— “eddie-bear.”

please.

“you can’t run from me, eddie.”

i can. i can. i will.

“eddie.”

his lungs are on fire.

“eddie.”

he’s slowing down.

“ *eds* .”

eddie wakes up shaking, breath choked when his eyes fly open. he blinks in the darkness, suddenly aware of his surroundings: his bed, the bus, and richie, whose hands are on his shoulders and whose face looks pale and worried, even in the dim light.

“eds,” richie whispers. “eds, are you alright?”

eddie still can’t breathe. the room is spinning, eddie’s chest is burning, and richie’s cupping his face, asking him... something. his voice sounds far away, or like it’s underwater, or like it’s far away and underwater, eddie’s not sure.

“inhaler,” eddie manages, attempting to slow the dizzying loop of thoughts spinning in his head like a damn theme park ride. richie seems to know exactly where it is — did eddie even know where it was? where did he put it last? — and he’s back before eddie even notices he’s gone.

“eddie, c’mon, you gotta—” richie’s trying to hand eddie the inhaler but eddie’s hands aren’t fucking working, and god, he’s done this a thousand times, why can’t he move? there’s a weight on his chest,

pushing down harder and harder and eddie's fingers can't hold the button down right and—

richie's up on the bunk beside him, propping eddie up against his chest, holding the inhaler to eddie's parted lips and mumbling "breathe, eddie, c'mon, breathe." somehow, eddie does. a big, wracking breath that sends the stinging relief of medicine into his lungs. in, out, in, out. they sit there, richie's giant hand rubbing circles on his back as eddie remembers what oxygen feels like. richie's voice, smooth and comforting despite the pinpricks of worry, comes back into focus. "you can't die on me yet; you still haven't seen me perform live." eddie reaches up to tug richie's wrist (and the inhaler) away from his mouth weakly.

"beep beep," eddie rasps, but his fingers stay curled loosely around richie's bony wrist. it's quiet again. richie doesn't pull away, and neither does eddie — even after a few minutes, when eddie's breathing evens out and his pulse drops to the normal skittering beat it holds around richie.

"sorry," eddie says finally, and now that his eyes have adjusted to the low light he can see richie fully. his eyes — those big, beautiful eyes that make electricity zip across eddie's skin when they're on him — fill with some mix of relief and exasperation.

"for what? having a bad dream? tch," richie clicks his tongue, and it feels too loud for the moment. ben's bed is right below, though his snores still ripple though the cabin despite the flurry of activity, so eddie doesn't think it's that big of a deal. "how *dare* you."

eddie stifles his smile. richie's still got his hand on eddie's back; it's weighty, protective. eddie realizes (almost begrudgingly) just how safe he feels right now. eddie felt a lot of things after nightmares; usually sweaty, usually helpless, usually weak. never, ever safe. reluctantly, eddie lets go of richie's wrist.

"i— thank you. for getting my— and just—" richie nods, and his glasses slip down the long bridge of his nose as he does so.

"of course, eds. i would do—" richie cuts himself off. the corner of his lips pull into a tired smile. "of course." they sit there, looking at each

other wide-eyed in the early morning, before richie's hand drops away from eddie's back.

eddie misses the touch immediately, and curses himself for it.

"i'll just uh," richie makes an aborted nod toward his own bed and starts to scooch off the edge of eddie's. "let you get back to—"

"you can stay," eddie blurts out, and ben's snores below them stutter to a stop. richie and eddie hold their breath, but the lawnmower motor kicks back in a few seconds later and richie looks at eddie like he's searching for something.

"would it— would it make you feel better if i did?" *permission* , eddie's brain says. he's asking for permission. eddie nods, afraid that if he opens his mouth something too big for this fragile bubble would come out and spoil it all. richie pushes his glasses up his nose, pauses, and then changes his mind and takes them off altogether before tossing them onto his own mattress. "okay," he agrees softly.

it doesn't take much adjusting to find a comfortable position that fits all of richie's gangly limbs around eddie's tiny frame. if eddie hadn't just been through the wash and back, it might've taken him years to fall asleep. all he can think about is the press of richie's bare chest to his back: the only thing separating them is the thin cotton of eddie's t-shirt, and that does nothing to stop the heat radiating through directly to eddie's core. as it is, eddie's fucking exhausted, and the thrill of feeling richie's palm flatten against his stomach only lasts as long as it takes eddie to drift off to sleep again.

he takes the feeling of richie and his hands with him, refusing to let his past ruin his dreams this time.

—

richie's gone when eddie wakes up, but that's probably for the better. less questions from the band, less static in eddie's stomach.

it's seven in the fucking morning and all eddie kasbrak can think about is richie's hands. *ugh* .

eddie reaches for his phone, hoping for an easy wake-up date with twitter, but it starts vibrating the moment he picks it up. eddie eyes the screen.

sting (work #)

"goodmorning, mr sting," eddie says, sounding as cheerful as he can for someone who's getting a call from his boss at 7am. "how can i help you?"

"you okay, kasprak? you sound like you just woke up. isn't it a few hours ahead out there?" eddie wipes a hand over his face.

"we are currently in texas, so it's still seven am." *just like in chicago, moron.*

"oh! sorry for the wake up call then." eddie waits, wishes fruitlessly, for sting to apologize and offer to call back at a reasonable time. surprising nobody, he does not. "how's the article coming?"

it's not! i had nothing the last time you called, i have nothing now, and i bet i'll have nothing the next time you check in, too!

"oh, it's great. i think i'm finally starting to get a real handle on where i want this piece to go. lots of ideas," eddie lies, staring at the roof of the bus. "lots and lots of ideas."

"now that's what i like to hear!" sting's ugly voice sounds pleased as punch. he was probably counting the dollar signs of this collaborative project already. it makes eddie's stomach a little sick. "well, that's all i had to check in on, so i guess i'll let you get back to whatever you were doing."

eddie has to pull the phone away from his ear for a moment. he wants to scream; this could've been a fucking email! everything sting says could be an email — it's never important enough to warrant a meeting or a phone call, and yet sting's always doing the fucking most and pulling eddie's complete attention only to drop it when he's

got the simple answer he'd needed. eddie holds the phone back up to his ear. "thanks for checking in. i'll make sure to send you an email with any big updates."

"don't worry about it. calls are easier, kaspbrak. it's the twenty-first century!" eddie doesn't have the time or the patience to unpack just how incorrect that statement is. he forces a laugh anyway, and hears the slider door open before he answers.

"you got it, mr. sting. goodbye." eddie's eyes meet richie's briefly and the corners of both their mouths turn up. richie gives a little salute; eddie bites back his amusement.

"and remember kaspbrak," sting says, tone darkening. "tight quarters and long trips... they do somethin' to ya. don't be stupid. you know that if somethin' happens, i'm gonna find out eventually." eddie's lips flatten. he wasn't doing anything wrong.

not yet.

sting doesn't wait for eddie to acknowledge the threat, just barks out something eddie figures is a laugh to ease the tension before he hangs up with a "keep your dick in your pants!" the line goes dead as richie reaches into the pile of sheets on his own bed to fish out his phone, and eddie watches the line of muscles in his back pull with the movement before he turns and heads back out into the kitchen.

"no promises," eddie says to no one.

you're a fucking idiot, he says to himself.

Notes for the Chapter:

thanks 2 the rats mickey, east, and jack for another chapter. the next two parts of this fic are parts i've been looking forward to writing since the beginning, so hold on to your shark-puppy headbands because its abt to get crazy.

[pinterest](#) / [shark puppy merch](#) / [send me your thoughts!!](#)

7. bill

Summary for the Chapter:

“five minutes, guys, look alive!” the assistant disappears as quickly as he’d popped back stage, whispering frantically into his headset. the reminder is necessary, bill knows, but the entire reason he’d pulled out his phone in the first place was so he didn’t think about the fact that he’s about to be broadcast to the entire nation. sure, it’s an up-and-coming kind of show, but it was still a show, a real tv show with real hosts and a real audience that would really laugh if bill tripped coming out from backstage.

you will not trip, bill promises himself. if you believe you won’t, you won’t.

his legs don’t have any comment, but bill doesn’t trust them.

Notes for the Chapter:

pat & emily, this ones all for you.

[this](#) is the IFBB song i reference.

PLEASE see notes at the end of the chapter

november

- tennessee

bill (11:20pm)

Did u ever tell Mrs murrin hi for me??

georgie (11:20pm)

bro i tried she does not know who u r

georgie (11:21pm)

i said "bill says hi" she said "who" i said "my brother" she said "i didnt know you had a bro thats so nice" the end

bill (11:21pm)

:(

georgie (11:22pm)

sorry bro :(

bill (11:23pm)

I made her a mug in ceramics class senior year and she said it was the loveliest gift she'd ever gotten but she can't even remember me??

georgie (11:23pm)

wait was it blue and ugly?

bill (11:23pm)

It was blue, yes

georgie (11:23pm)

hhahahahhahahahahaha

georgie (11:24pm)

bro she uses that as a paperwait now 🤡🤡

bill (11:24pm)

Fuck u

bill (11:25pm)

My initials are carved into the bottom of that!! How can she forget BD??

georgie (11:25pm)

pretty easily i guess

georgie (11:25pm)



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that he's about to be broadcast to the entire nation. sure, it's an up-and-coming kind of show, but it was still a show, a real tv show with real hosts and a real audience that would really laugh if bill tripped coming out from backstage.

you will not trip, bill promises himself. *if you believe you won't, you won't*.

his legs don't have any comment, but bill doesn't trust them.

c&c and the midnight crew (lovingly referred to as c&c by viewers) had only been airing for a few months, but they'd gained some serious traction with the co-hosts' chemistry and their creative segments. *the shark puppy of late night* , ben had joked, right before richie had excused himself to vomit.

bill (11:26pm)

Are u watching right channel? We on soon

georgie (11:26pm)

ya i'm streaming it on their website

georgie (11:26pm)

marys here too she says good luck

bill (11:27pm)

Streaming??

georgie (11:27pm)

ya have u ever heard of a computer bill

bill (11:27pm)

Yes Fuck u

bill (11:28pm)

I didn't know u could watch live tv online!!

georgie (11:28pm)

im posting that you said that on twitter so your fans
can see Bill Denbrough is an idiot

georgie (11:28pm)

love u bro 🤔

“hey, have you guys seen richie?” eddie asks, and bill’s quick head count confirms they’re missing one.

“he might still be doing his pre-show routine,” bev guesses, pretending to vomit before straightening her cuffs for the sixth time. clearly, bill and richie aren’t alone in their nerves. bev is made of steel and roses, thorns and all, and to the rest of the studio she probably looks like the least affected of the group. leaned up against the wall in her dusty blue fitted suit, a cigarette tucked behind her ear, she is the picture of cool and collected. if bill didn’t know her so well he’d think she’d done this a thousand times before. “i’d check the bathroom.”

ben quickly offers to look and eddie makes a face like he has no idea what she’s talking about, but richie comes skirting around the corner

in a tumble of messy curls and skewed glasses before anyone even moves. “am i late? are we good?” bev kicks off the wall and starts rolling up richie’s sleeves without an answer. since this is their first appearance on tv (they’d done interviews before, just never of this scale) bev had insisted on making sure they all — *richie* — looked good. all of them, eddie included (though he’d just be standing backstage, as he always did) have been wrapped in bev’s styling and varying shades of blue, until they stopped looking so much like college kids dicking around in their parents’ basement and looked a little more like a professional rock band. she’d even managed to wrestle richie into wearing a button up, even if it hung open around a shirt that has *SEX* printed in bold, black lettering.

some battles just aren’t worth fighting.

“okay, they’re about to call you out there,” the assistant says from behind bill where he’d reappeared out of thin air. “you guys know what to do. i know you’ve been briefed, but please, *please*,” the man turns to richie, even though he’s addressing all of them. “try not to say fuck while we’re live. thanks.”

they all shuffle to the edge of their waiting mark. bill feels a faint pressure on the dip of his back, and when he looks up, mike’s smiling down reassuringly at him.

“please welcome to the stage... shark puppy!”

“now, ben, you’re not usually on stage, are you?” ben shakes his head at cleo’s question.

“i’m not really the musical type.” that isn’t true. ben has a beautiful voice: soft and low and clear, like he could sing you to sleep. “though a friend bought me a banjo before the trip started.”

“yep. ben got a banjo and the rest of us got earplugs.” the audience laughs and richie leans over from his seat behind the couch, claps

ben apologetically on the shoulder. “it’s okay, buddy, you’ll get there some day.”

“so you’re not in the band,” char refocuses with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. she sits back in her chair, legs kicked up on the edge of her desk. cleo’s looking similarly relaxed behind her own desk. they might be co-hosts, but that doesn’t mean they’d be sharing a single spotlight. “but you’re still in the band?”

“yeah, pretty much. it’s kind of— well. i think bev does the best job of explaining it.” ben throws a look her way where she’s sitting beside richie, and bill doesn’t turn around to see but he’s sure she does some little *oh please* gesture because a ripple of giggles goes through the audience.

“there’s nothing really to explain,” bev says. “i guess— i guess i’d say we’re not *just* a band. and we’re not even really just friends, either.” bill does turn around now; he can hear the lilt of bev’s voice that means she’s getting a little emotional, which starts making him emotional too. “we’re a family. we really are, as cliché as that sounds. i mean, most of us...” bev motions to the group of them, and bill’s eyes drop momentarily to mike beside him, but quickly returns his gaze to bev when mike turns over his shoulder to look at her too. “we didn’t have good families growing up. until i met these guys i didn’t even have friends. i was a loser.” bev’s eyes found bill’s and she smiled, something warm and grateful. “and then i met bill. he was also a loser.” the audience laughs, and bill gives them a little *yeah, pretty much* nod.

“he still is,” richie teases, and bev’s on tv so she doesn’t smack him but bill sees her hand twitch like she wants to. they’re all laughing about it anyways, because it’s true.

“we all are,” mike adds, and that has them all nodding. like, bill joined (and genuinely enjoyed) a bowling league for three years. richie regularly participated in online chess tournaments to *keep his brain fresh*. stan’s idea of a fun night out in college was staying in. yeah, he’d spend that night in getting obliterated and doing puzzles, but still. loser. they were all losers, born and raised.

“and we always will be.” bev shrugs. “but that’s what makes us who

we are. we're losers together. i wouldn't trade these guys for the world — even if richie drives me insane sometimes." richie beams and throws an arm around her, pulling her tight.

"losers for life, baby!" the audience *awws* and claps, and bill feels a throb of emotion too tight for live television. there are tears in his eyes but he forces them away with a few hard blinks; georgie would find a way to tease him about it later if he caught a whiff of saltwater on screen.

"richie woke up half the bus last week by playing a melodica cover of *no humps* at four a.m last week," stanley tells char and cleo, face weary. cleo grins around the straw of her milkshake. bill really likes the atmosphere of this show; he takes a sip of his own milkshake, only getting a little up the back of his nose when he snorts at the rest of stanley's sentence. "so i don't know what bev is on about, because i'm currently looking for someone to take richie's place."

"and what about the seventh? that little guy over there?" char points just off-stage with her pen and everyone in the room (including one of the camera men) swing around to where eddie's standing wide-eyed and frozen. "he's in blue too. why didn't he come out with you guys?" eddie gives a jerky wave to the camera still trained on him. he is *very* pale.

"oh, that's eddie. h-he's—" bill stops, suddenly remembering he's not actually allowed to say what eddie's doing here on tour with them. now, with the pressure of the lights and the audience's attention on him, he can't remember the lie they'd made up to tell crew and press either. luckily, mike speaks up from next to him.

"the record label rep's son." *oh, right, 'colleen's son'*. bill lets out the breath that had locked itself in his ribs. thank god mike always has a spare braincell around. "he's touring with us to see what music life is all about."

"he's also our friend," ben chimes in. "so bev designed an outfit for him too. he's the closest thing we'll get to a seventh member of shark puppy." they all voice their agreement, and when bill looks back over, eddie's face has gone from white to pink and he's grinning down at his shoes.

“now i know we’re all happy you guys are close— aren’t we happy that shark puppy found each other?” the crowd cheers when cleo prompts, and bill hides his smile with another sip of his milkshake. “but i think we all want to know if any of you are even closer than that.” on an inhale, bill chokes. just a little — enough to startle him and have him coughing into his sweater, but not enough to pull the room’s attention from where char is pulling out a giant print-off of a fan’s tweet.

“last weekend twitter user @wtfissharkpuppy tweeted out some very interesting pictures.” along with the caption — OMG GUYS SHARK PUPPY SWAM IN MY POOL — the pictures are there, blown up huge and incriminating. the first was the picture bill and mike had agreed to, the both of them wearing dopey smiles over sophie’s shoulders. the other was... less innocent, and one that bill hadn’t seen before. it must’ve been taken right before sophie barged in that night: even through the grain, bill can see his hand pressed firm against mike’s chest, their faces too close for casual conversation in the water. it looked, frankly, like they’d been about to kiss.

bill can’t feel his pulse. that is bad, right? that he can’t feel his heart beating?

at the same moment that char goes to ask the question everyone in the room is thinking, stanley starts laughing. like, really laughing. holding his stomach, eyes squeezed closed, braying kind of laughter — *kookie kookie lend me your bones* kind of laughter. bill doesn’t want to look at any of the cameras currently pointed at him, so he looks back at stanley, and then at richie, who’s wearing a face like he’s planning something.

“sorry for him, it’s just—” richie glances at stan, who’s still going strong. “well, if you’re implying that bill and mike are getting their smang on because of that picture, then i guess you’re gonna’ have to imply we’re *all* getting our smang on.” *wait, what?* bill’s face scrunches in confusion, and richie leans forward to wrap an arm around bill. “there’s just somethin’ about bill’s cuddly nature that makes us all wanna’ get up close and personal, you know?”

bev catches on quicker than bill does. “it’s true. when we were kids, we all had crushes on him at some point. even ben.”

“it’s true,” ben nods, a sparkle in his eye. bill flushes an even deeper red as bev and ben both lean in to kiss the top of his head and his cheek, respectively. worst of all, mike’s hand is heavy on his knee. stanley’s still hiccuping with giggles.

cleo’s mouth hangs open and char’s is pulled into the most fascinated smirk.

“there’s just something about bill denbrough,” richie sighs dreamily, and bill hears eddie cackle from offstage.

char laughs, delighted. “there sure is.”

bill trips when exiting, and stanley has to lean against the wall to catch his breath because it sends him back into his laughing fit.

“okayokayokayokay,” bev says loudly, voice traveling over the raucous whispers of her drunk friends. “eddie. truth or dare.”

they were drunk. very drunk. at least, bill was very drunk, and everyone else seemed to be having as good of a time as him, so he could only assume.

“dare,” eddie answers, and he’s wearing that determined edge in his eye even though bill swears he saw eddie’s lip tremble.

or maybe , bill thinks, *i’m so drunk my vision is buffering* .

when stan had pulled it together, he’d taken bill’s face in his wiry hands and said “bill. we are so even now.” then he’d snorted, and then he’d bitten down on his lip to contain himself before he went off the rails again. “also, i know eddie ate the oreos. you need to stop

big-billing people and let them take responsibility for their own actions.” stan snorted again, and his hand flew to cover his mouth in a last futile effort to stop laughing. “i’m so sorry.”

mike was the one who’d suggested stopping at a liquor store before they left the city that night.

“i dare you to do the splits,” she says. its quite an evil dare, if bill is reading her eyebrows right, and eddie *hmpfs* when he stands so yeah he’s pretty sure this wasn’t something eddie had planned on sharing with anyone but her.

“he can do the splits?” richie squeaks, and then whispers furiously to bev under his breath, “this is so not fucking fair, bev.”

eddie can in fact do the splits, or at least is closer to being able to do the splits than anyone else on this bus. richie muffles his broken sob with another drink.

bill’s still thinking about earlier.

it’s not that things have been weird since the pool incident, because they haven’t. seriously, they haven’t; that’s the weird part. bill doesn’t feel weird at all, and mike doesn’t seem to either. he hasn’t pulled away or tried to step forward, just has gone on existing like what had happened in the pool was something that happened regularly. it makes bill feel like he is losing his freaking mind.

in fact, mike is sitting beside bill in the kitchenette booth right now, acting all not-weird. “has anyone collected the bet money for when richie finally gets eddie to fuck him?” mike murmurs to him, lips cherry-sweet from the mixed drink he was sipping. at least, bill assumes that’s how they’d taste. fuck, he is looking at mike’s lips. vodka courses through his veins, burns inside him the way mike burns inside his lungs. when bill finally looks up, mike’s smiling into his cup.

“hey, bill,” eddie calls, and bill jumps a little like he’s been caught red-handed. eddie, a good friend, remains stoic. “truth or dare.”

“uh... t-truth,” bill decides. the dares had been getting increasingly

dangerous and/or embarrassing, and bill is very comfortable here in this booth, thank you very much. richie boos.

eddie must be drunk, has to be, because his question is “have you jacked-off on this tour bus?” and it leaves everyone’s jaws hanging open. except stan, who snorts, and ben, who looks down guiltily at his phone.

“h-have you?” bill deflects.

eddie flushes. “that’s *not* the question. it’s *your* truth.”

bill takes a sip of his drink and cringes. he keeps forgetting how strong he made it.

“yuh-yes.”

“what? when?” richie gasps, and bev’s giggling, but bill just waves his free hand around.

“ah-ah, no, one truth per t-turn.” bill just wants to get off this subject right now, especially because he can feel mike’s gaze burning a hole through his head. “bev, truth or dare.”

“truth.”

bill bit his lip. he’d been hoping she’d say that. “were you serious? earlier? when you said you all had crushes on me as kids?”

bev scoffs. “raise your hand if your heart’s ever felt personally victimized by bill denbrough.” everyone in the room raises their hand. stan raises both. even eddie’s got one up, and when bill notices eddie just shrugs.

“there’s just something about bill denbrough,” eddie says cheesily, and that sends all of them, bill included, into drunken laughter. laughing is good, bill thinks; laughing takes away from the hope that had curled itself around bill’s guts and squeezed when mike’s hand raised with the rest of the losers’.

richie gasps in the middle of it all and grabs bev’s calf. “bevs, i need you to lay down a beat. i have an idea.”

shark puppy's first viral video is shaky, recorded on an iphone, and contains their first song written as a seven-person team.

it's called *I Fucked Big Bill*, to bill's chagrin, and he gets 16 texts from georgie (and two members from his old bowling team) about it when he wakes up.

the idea had been simple: richie and bev came up with an easy beat, and then richie had freestyled a verse over it, followed by a very frank "i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill" chorus. it had brought tears to stan's eyes, and bev had barely been able to keep the beat through it. immediately, everyone had their own ideas for an additional chorus — everyone had fucked big bill!

except big bill himself, who was trying to breathe through the laughter wracking his body.

"w-wait, wait," bill had said, gaining enough composure to tug his phone from his pocket. "start over."

the hoedown style of i fucked big bill (and the entire 3 minute video of golden drunk shark puppy content) spread online so fast that soon fans were tweeting at the record company to have them perform it at their future concerts.

like the record company had any say in richie's impulsive decisions to change the set list. pff.

"we've gotta have spaghetti on stage with us, though," richie says on the way to their next show. no one disagrees. well, eddie does. with finality.

"no way. no way! sing? on stage? no."

"w-we're not doing it without you, eddie," bill says earnestly, and eddie throws his hands up.

“you can’t put this on me!”

“oh, c’mon eds. don’t give that shit about being a performer. it’s the same thing as a piano recital.” eddie flips richie off but bill’s stuck on the whole recital thing and—

“wait, you p-play piano? and you didn’t tell us?”

“HA! told you! hey, get off, eddie!”

eventually, eddie had agreed. bill had left long before that though, taking a moment to rub his eyes until he saw stars and forgotten the image of eddie straddling richie to tickle him in the middle of the kitchen floor.

november

- louisville, kentucky

there’s a soft tapping on the door, and bill calls out “come in” as eddie pushes the door open.

“he-hey eddie,” bill says to eddie’s reflection and continues to try and push his straight hair into something with more life than roadkill.

“i’m freaking out a little bit, bill,” eddie whispers, and bill gives up on his hair in favor of giving eddie his full attention. he remembers that feeling.

bill wipes his hands on his pants before he places them on eddie’s shoulders. they’re almost the same height, but bill had at least an inch on him — barely. “i’m not going to lie and say its n-not scary.” that doesn’t seem to calm eddie down at all. bill barrels on. “but i also won’t lie and say it’s not f- *fun* .”

“it won’t be fun when i vomit on stage for everyone to see,” eddie says miserably. bill scoffs.

“you know ri-richie throws up before every show?” eddie’s eyebrows knit together.

“that’s like, super unhealthy for his teeth and throat.”

“yeah, it is, he’s w-working on it.” eddie’s eyebrows don’t budge, but he looks a little less shaky. “what i m-mean is we still get nervous, too. that doesn’t go away.” bill had been very disappointed to find that out. “but y-you shouldn’t let it stop you from g-going out there. you have the f-funniest verse, dude. y-you should do it.”

eddie sucks his bottom lip into his mouth and bounces on his heels before nodding. “you’re right. you’re right, you’re totally right, it’s just the whole—” eddie makes a vague hand gesture and an indescribable sound of exasperation and bill nods, even if he doesn’t completely understand what eddie’s saying. “okay, i’m gonna go re-tie my shoes. okay. i’ll see you out there.”

“o-okay.”

“okay.” eddie takes a deep breath and leaves. bill watches after, quietly amused.

by the time mike comes to collect him for the pre-show chant, bill’s hair is still mostly flat but it looks at least kind of tousled, so he’s fine with it.

“i’m gonna be honest,” mike says as they walk from the dressing rooms to the stage, arms swinging so close they brush if bill walks a little heavier on his right side. “i’m kind of glad eddie wrote that article about us.”

“m-me too,” bill admits. it didn’t matter what eddie had said in the review now. it hadn’t mattered before, either, but now that they were all friends it was like there was another layer to it all. in a way, that article brought them all together.

“eddie’s a cool guy. he... rounds it all out, you know?”

bill does know. he nods his head and meets mike’s gaze with a soft little smile. “yeah.”

“and if he fucks richie by thanksgiving we’re up fifty dollars,” mike adds, and they both laugh. the entire group (and some of the crew, too, like britt and zuz and even alex) had decided it was no longer a question of if, but when, and finally put hard cash down on the outcome. it really is a ticking time bomb at this point.

actually, bill thinks, dragging his eyes away from where mike’s shine above him, *there might be a few ticking time bombs in this place.*

they save it until encore. it only seems right: a big song for a big send off.

“you have been fucking awesome, louisville!” the crowd screams. they scream after a lot of things richie says. they eat everything up, all of it, from bev’s drum solos to richie’s tambourine, filled with glitter and shaking over the front rows. there’s nothing quite like a shark puppy show, because none are ever the same. “now we’re going to bring out some special guests for this last one. you might recognize them from a video we posted a couple nights ago.”

ben and eddie walk on, the latter looking drastically more nervous than ben, who always kind of looks like a tranquil mountain. the crowd erupts, the loudest they’ve been all night. they know those faces; they know whats coming. “you all know ben hanscom, full-time manager and full-time sexy lumberjack.” someone calls out *i love you ben handsome* and ben waves in their direction, shy and sweet. “but i’d like you all to give a warm welcome to our friend and tour buddy, eddie ‘spaghetti’ kaspbrak!” richie hoots into the mic and the crowd cheers; eddie looks adorably flustered.

bev sets her cajón in the center of the stage and the boys fill in around her to form a half-circle, except bill, who sits dead center. they’d only played through this once after the video to make sure they would all be comfortable (i.e, eddie wouldn’t freak out) before the show, but even bill knows the whole song by heart at this point. at the back of the concert hall, people start chanting *big bill big bill big*

bill until it fills the room and *bill* covers his face to hide his embarrassment.

“this,” *richie* says into the mic, his voice low and sultry and dramatic. “is ‘i fucked big *bill*.’”

the roar of the crowd is thundering, to the point that the first few beats of the song are lost. soon enough, the audience is stomping and clapping with them, like they might have it memorized too. “sing along when you know the words!” *richie* calls out, lost to the crowd when *ben* starts singing.

one night alone, i was fixing up the house

big bill came over just to help me out

our eyes met, and our hands briefly touched

now were fucking every tuesday after lunch

all of them join in for the chorus, and so does some of the audience. *bill* thinks he can see the girl with the #TOZIERSLUT sign screaming all the words.

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill

yeah he’s a slut, but that ain’t new

i fucked bill denbrough, and so did you

eddie’s up next. despite the tiny freakout he’d had in *bill’s* dressing room, *eddie* sounds a lot more like the drunk recording than the timid performance he’d given during mic check. the crowds gaining enthusiasm too, and by the end of *eddie’s* verse, he’s jumping up and down with the energy of it all.

one time big bill snuck into my room

took off his shirt in the light of the moon
we kissed, quiet and serene
not only was he beautiful, but he made me scream

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill
i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill
yeah he's a slut, but that ain't new
i fucked bill denbrough, and so did you

while richie is hands down the attention pull (some might call it eyesore) of shark puppy, mike could give him the strongest run for his money. as his verse starts (and bill's neck starts to heat for completely unrelated reasons) mike dances out from the line and gives a particularly dramatic performance.

in my garage, were were underneath the hood
when big bill started to whip it good

half the crowd screams when mike spansk an invisible ass in time with his words; bill does too, just internally, and for a lot longer.

some grease stains will never wash away
and i've never used those jumper cables since that day

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill
i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill
yeah he's a slut, but that ain't new

i fucked bill denbrough, and so did you

richie's up next, and has no interest in his performance being topped, which means bill becomes an unwilling participant in the charade when richie lays on his back in front of him and splays his legs wide open.

the pictures that will come from this concert are going to go straight to colleen and bill doesn't know if he'll be able to explain them away.

so i was staring at his shoulders at the quarry

i grabbed him by the hand and begged big bill to hurry

*we washed off in the water, god this guy keeps getting
hotter*

he fucked me hard and fast — i took it up the ass!

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill

yeah he's a slut, but that ain't new

i fucked bill denbrough, and so did you

bill's saved from the embarrassment of another live performance since bev can't leave her cajón, but it's a whole new kind of embarrassment to have hundreds of strangers scream the last line of her verse at him.

i fucked big bill in the back of mike's truck

driving 'round town, he was feeling me up

pulling on my hair, then boy did he jump

when i got my finger in his ass at the next speed bump!

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill

i fucked big bill, yeah i fucked big bill

yeah he's a slut, but that ain't new

i fucked bill denbrough, and so did you

stan finishes them up. by this time everyone is dancing around the stage except for bev keeping rhythm and bill losing his shit on the floor of the stage in the middle of the chaos. stan, who was normally contained by his keyboard, is breaking it the fuck down with his weird little kicks and struts, and bill knows right then this is going to become a staple of their set.

bill would do it for them.

i fucked big bill, he's a passionate lover

the way he holds me is like no other

we packed our bags and made a camp

and then he took my cock like a champ

we fucked big bill, yeah we fucked big bill

we fucked big bill, yeah we fucked big bill

“OUR MEMORIES OF FUCKING HIM ARE THERE FOREVER,” richie screams into the crowd, and they’re all going fucking nuts, too: a room full of flashlights, phone screens, and a few hundred fans screaming about fucking the lead singer of shark puppy.

WE FUCKED BILL DENBROUGH

but not together.

the song ends with a roll on bev's cajón and a blackout, richie's "goodnight milfs of louisville" lost to the screams of the audience.

Notes for the Chapter:

when i started writing this fic, i didn't have any plans to use anyone else's lyrics for my fic. then halfway thru chapter 2 i heard emily's version of IFBB and i immediately carved a place for her & pat's beautiful love child. i still sing IFBB to myself at the library, and at this point i might never stop.

[pat's lyrics](#) / [emily's version](#)

for those of you wondering when this E rating might actually get some use.... your wait ends with my next post.

8. eddie

Summary for the Chapter:

bill suggests bowling, which is shut down quicker than bev's suggestion to check out the hotel swimming pool.

"n-not funny, bev," bill says, flipping her off, but he's smiling, too.

patty pitches tuxedo jack's to an overwhelmingly receptive audience; they're all looking for a night to go balls to the wall buck wild, and a gay bar will always be the easiest route for that. richie looks ecstatic, throws an arm around bill and rejoices the fact bill's finally getting to go to a club tozier-style, whatever that means, and eddie is... eddie's excited! he is! the tour has taken more out of him than he'd expected, and this is exactly what he needs right now, but...

richie's eyes catch his in the fluorescent hallway lights and eddie swallows. a lot could happen in the darkness of a night club.

Notes for the Chapter:

welcome to the chapter that makes the E rating make sense.

on an unrelated note, some of y'all bout to be real mad at me 🙄...

november

- chicago, illinois

"i think we're pulling up to the langham right now, patty, i'm gonna have to go." eddie pushes richie away where he's trying to whisper stupid things into the mouthpiece and walks to the front of the bus

— away from distractions. “everyone but ben is on board for a night out. he said he’s going to stay at the hotel and watch tv.” eddie didn’t believe it for a second. at some point, ben’s phone background had changed: gone was emma watson, replaced instead by the shape of someone new, silhouetted in the rays of sunlight and standing on top of some mountain. it was impossible to make out the face — whoever it was wasn’t even looking at the camera — but eddie didn’t need to know who it was to know she was clearly the reason behind ben’s dopey smile.

no one else seemed to notice; eddie had made a comment about ben’s secret girlfriend to bill the other day, to which bill had snorted and said

“unless that secret girlfriend is beverly marsh, i d-doubt it.”

maybe eddie doesn’t know ben as well as bill does, but eddie isn’t stupid, he’s gay: eddie can recognize yearning from fucking space. ben might look at bev with the echoes of love, but he looks at his phone like it’s the answer to every question he’d ever ask.

“boo,” comes patty’s answer, and eddie smiles to himself. three months without his best friend ends today.

“you’ll just have to meet him before the concert tomorrow.”

“i can deal with that,” patty sighs. “as long as i get to meet mr. overgrown twink tonight.” her voice sounds downright evil, and fuck, eddie’s been so worried about bev and her meeting that he didn’t even think about that combo. “i’ve been dying to see the guy you definitely positively do not have a crush on.”

“you know, richie just told me he can’t go out tonight, sorry patty, gotta go, bye!” eddie hangs up on patty’s cackle just as something — someone — creeps up behind him and pinches his side.

eddie gives a very manly, very not-scared squeal.

“fuck you, richie,” eddie grumbles, doing nothing to lessen richie’s grin. whatever richie was going to say is cut off by the bus slamming on the breaks and eddie’s body flying forward into richie’s chest.

eddie can hear conrad screaming expletives at whatever chicago driver cut him off, but he's a little distracted by richie's hands, which had flown to eddie's hips to stop his movement.

"well damn, kaspbrak — right here? in front of everyone?" richie's eyes are bright and eddie can't fucking do this right now, so he very maturely sticks his tongue out and squirms out of richie's grasp as quick as he can. the bus stops — for real this time, eddie can feel the parking brake drop — and eddie does *not* run away from richie: he just moves very fast towards the exit and maybe skips a few stairs in his excitement to get off the bus.

being home feels fucking amazing. in all the places eddie has ever lived, none of them felt quite right; that might have had something to do with the people he was living with, actually, but the point remains the same. chicago is home, even with its weird hot dog smell and occasional angry taxi driver in a cubs hat screaming for him to get out of the road. patty is here, his work is here, and... eddie watches the rest of the band hop off the bus.

and now the rest of his friends are here too. there's a fullness spreading in his bones, a burgeoning of something unnameable and unstoppable.

"well, if it isn't eddie kaspbrak in the flesh." eddie whips around. "how the fuck are ya, kid?"

patty's standing against the big walls of windows of the langham, white pantsuit and blond hair rippling in the sting of the late november breeze. eddie has never wanted to kiss a woman as much as he'd like to kiss patty blum right now.

they meet somewhere in the middle, hugging like it had been three years instead of three months. eddie's *i missed you, fucker* is lost to the wind, as is patty's *right back atcha, kid*, but the sentiment of it all is louder than the traffic behind them.

"who's the babe-a-tron, eds?" richie calls. eddie pulls away from patty's embrace in time to see richie nursing his arm, where eddie can only assume stan smacked him for his comment. stan doesn't look guilty, though: he looks dumbstruck, and awestruck, and

lovestruck, and all the other strucks. one sideways glance at patty confirms she's got a similar expression, staring right back at stan.

"this is patty," eddie introduces to the group. he doesn't miss the way richie's shoulders subtly sag in relief. "she's the one i've been telling you about."

"you and stan both," mike mutters, and bev giggles. bill just looks happy to be there.

they rush through introductions — it's all just formalities anyway, patty's known shark puppy since the start and eddie (and stan, apparently) had too many stories about her for anyone to be confused.

they all look away politely when patty reaches stan, though stan can't do anything but stand there holding patty's hand and beaming. not that eddie is watching from the corner of his eye.

god, they were so cute eddie's going to lose his fucking mind.

when eddie found out there would be a dark day before the friday concert, he'd called patty immediately. she was already planning on having lunch with eddie and meeting up with them to see the concert, but a full night for the eight of them to run around untethered by responsibilities and stuffed with alcohol was an irresistible prospect. patty had nearly screamed she'd been so excited, and the first words out of her mouth were

"we're going to tuxedo jack's." tuxedo jack's was their favorite nightclub; a gay bar constantly filled with dancing, pudding shots, and a bouncer that knew them both by name. at the suggestion, eddie pictured richie on the dance floor, decked out in some flamboyant, ugly shirt and swinging his hips—

"maybe!" eddie had said tightly. "we'll have to ask the group!"

patty helps them bring their bags up to the rooms (i.e she gives eddie her purse and talks to no one but stan the whole time). stan should be dropping off his bag in mike and bill's room again, but he doesn't. patty had offered the whole band stay at their apartment, but eddie

knew it was too small to fit all of them comfortably.

clearly there'd be enough room for stan, though.

eddie hadn't planned on staying at the hotel — missing the chance to sleep in his own bed with his sheets and his goose-feather pillows? as if — but he also hadn't planned on listening to patty's headboard slam against his wall all night, so when richie swipes into the last suite, eddie follows him inside.

"shut up," he mumbles when he brushes past richie's smirking form before dropping his bag on the bed next to the window.

richie shrugs, tossing his backpack onto the other mattress. "i didn't say anything."

they're only alone for fifteen, twenty seconds before patty's pounding on the door, calling "come on! we've got plans to make!"

bill suggests bowling, which is shut down quicker than bev's suggestion to check out the hotel swimming pool.

"n-not funny, bev," bill says, flipping her off, but he's smiling, too.

patty pitches tuxedo jack's to an overwhelmingly receptive audience; they're all looking for a night to go balls to the wall buck wild, and a gay bar will always be the easiest route for that. richie looks ecstatic, throws an arm around bill and rejoices the fact bill's finally getting to go to a club tozier-style, whatever that means, and eddie is... eddie's excited! he is! the tour has taken more out of him than he'd expected, and this is exactly what he needs right now, but...

richie's eyes catch his in the fluorescent hallway lights and eddie swallows. a lot could happen in the darkness of a night club.

bev, patty, and eddie end up in bev and ben's room because it has the best mirrors, and the rest of the boys fuck around next door. eddie

can hear garbled chanting through the wall and he hopes the rest of their neighbors are good sports.

bev and patty's nefarious giggles break eddie from his trance, and he blinks a few times to clear the shower curtain print from his vision before turning to the girls stationed at the mirror. "what are you two laughing about?"

"oh, nothing," patty placates, sending her and bev back into suppressed laughter.

"i should've never introduced you guys." eddie kicks his legs where he sits up on the bathroom counter. the girls are still looking at him.

"what?"

"is that what you're wearing?" eddie looks down. it's a t-shirt and his black athletic shorts; nothing fancy, but it shows off his legs (and ass, if he was being straightforward), and that's what he wants.

"yes?"

"no," patty corrects, shaking her head until eddie slowly shakes his head too. "if we're going out, we're going out, baby. now hold still while bev puts this on." bev comes at him with the eyeliner pencil before eddie really knows what's happening.

eddie doesn't struggle. against the combined powers of patverly, it's useless.

"i hate that we're the same size," eddie grumbles, letting bev tuck the mesh shirt he was borrowing into his track shorts. not only did he squeeze perfectly into that, her worn-out pink converse had slid on like he was a grunged-out version of cinderella.

"i love it," bev counters, and tousled his hair. "now i can hem my own clothes without pricking myself every five seconds." she leans in and pecks his cheek. "besides. you look hot."

he does. he looks really hot, actually; eddie can't stop looking at himself. the eyeliner is smudged artfully around his brown eyes, making them look even bigger than they already are. the track shorts

are folded up and cinched around the mesh of the shirt so that not only did his legs look ten miles long, but the curve of his ass was barely contained beneath the fabric.

“she’s right,” ben agrees from the bed. he’s sprawled out on the sheets with a tray of food from room-service and a book about global politics. already having a rocking thursday night in and the rest of them hadn’t even left yet. “you might actually kill ri— er, uh, someone.” ben takes a bite of his sandwich in lieu of trying to cover his slip-up, and eddie turns his red face back to the mirror.

well. ben isn’t *wrong* .

the door beeps as patty returns, tossing the room key back to bev. “the boys are all set when we are,” she says, and slips on a pair of heels that eddie thinks could actually pierce someone’s heart with the right amount of pressure. “richie loves his custom merch.” the girls share an identical, devilish smile, and eddie realizes they must have gotten to richie too.

bev throws an arm around both of their shoulders (though patty is significantly taller than both of them in her heels) and grins. “lets go girls!”

“be safe ladies!” ben calls as they leave, not looking up from his book. “good luck!”

eddie was going to need it.

the first thing eddie does when the uber pulls up to the club is buy a drink. the second thing he does is buy another. he drinks them both in quick succession and wipes a shaky hand across the back of his mouth. neither of them do anything to clear the image of richie in his hand-torn crop top and ripped jeans leaned up against the elevator wall, but they help. kind of.

“gonna save any for the rest of us, eds?” richie asks, appearing on his

left. the music pulses through the club, loud and repetitive, but over by the bar eddie can hear every lilt in richie's voice. richie doesn't wait for a reply, just orders a round of shots for the group that has materialized in the space behind him. maybe the shot will be enough to forget how richie's eyes had darkened when eddie came out of the hotel room — enough to forget the weight of richie's stare the entire uber ride over, or at least enough to forget the choked sound richie had made when eddie's shorts rode up as he exited the car.

it won't be, but eddie hopes anyway.

"to shark puppy!" patty announces when they hold up their shot glasses, and stan throws in an "and patty!" before they all throw the burning liquid back. with the alcohol from the first two drinks settling into his veins, eddie waves bev off when she suggests some buttery nipples. there's an entire night ahead of him, and he doesn't want his vision going blurry before he's even made it to the dance floor. the rest of them are all in, though, which means eddie has to watch richie lean over and take his buttery nipple hands-free.

"that's what you call talent," richie brags when he's swallowed. there's a droplet of baileys still on his lip, and eddie would like nothing more than to lick it off.

no you would not, he tells himself. *you do not want to lick any part of richie tozier, not his lip, and especially not his—*

"you've got some..." eddie trails off, still staring openly at richie's mouth. his hands move before his brain can stop them, and eddie reaches up to brush his thumb across the curve of richie's lower lip, wiping the liquor from the pink skin before bringing it to his own mouth. the taste of the baileys is sweet, but the tiny breath richie sucks in as his eyes track the movement is sweeter.

eddie kaspbrak, you are a fool, the sensible side of his brain says, and then shuts down for the rest of the evening.

"dancing?" patty suggests, breaking the moment. bill looks hesitant, but richie grabs hold of his shoulders and directs him toward the crowd of bodies near the speakers.

“dancing,” eddie agrees, and the rest of them follow in bill and richie’s steps.

patty grabs eddie’s hand and leads him to the center of the crowd; her favorite place to be. “lets show these out of towners how to move it chicago style,” she calls into eddie’s ear, and they proceed to do just that.

eddie can dance. eddie can really dance, and he really knows it. patty can dance too, and eddie can only imagine what they must look like. if stan’s face is anything to go by, eddie imagines they look really, really good.

“can i cut in?” a voice from behind him says over the beat of the music. eddie doesn’t bother hiding his disappointment when he finds it’s some stranger, but he also doesn’t say no. they were here to dance, right? so he would dance.

the man’s hands feel clunky where they land on eddie’s hips, and his breath smells too much like vodka and scallops. it’s making eddie a little sick, so he turns in the stranger’s grip so that at the very least he wouldn’t have his gross breath blowing hot in his face. actually, once he’s no longer worrying about the stranger’s potential halitosis, once eddie closes his eyes, it’s not so bad. he starts to lose himself in the beat of the music, hips swinging in time. with his eyes closed like this, eddie could pretend those hands belonged to anybody.

“i think your boyfriend’s watching us,” the man says against eddie’s ear, and eddie’s nose scrunches because he doesn’t have a fucking clue what this guy’s talking about.

eddie’s eyes open and he says, confused “i don’t have a— ” but sure enough, someone’s watching. through the flashing lights and sweaty bodies, eddie can see him — richie’s so tall eddie can always fucking see him, can spot him in a crowd of a thousand with those unruly curls and that crooked smile. richie’s not smiling now, not really. he’s got his hands on some blond boy, pressed up against richie’s frame like eddie’s pressed up against Scallop Breath, and he’s watching. staring. at eddie.

eddie never wants him to look away.

they dance like that for awhile, and maybe eddie gets a little dirty with the way he moves his hips just to see richie's fingers dig into where he holds the blond's waist. richie's gaze never drops.

before, eddie had pushed scallop breath's hands away when they'd tried to roam free. now, with richie's undivided attention, eddie wraps his fingers around one of the man's hands and guides it down, down, until it covers eddie's pale thigh and digs in to the flesh there. it does nothing for eddie; the darkness that floods richie's eyes, though, sends sparks through eddie's spine. without missing a beat, richie's hand mirrors the action, sliding down the blond man's thigh and gripping it. eddie's mouth falls open and his head drops back onto the stranger's shoulder and richie, *that bastard* , smirks.

"do you maybe want to get out of here?" scallop breath asks, his hand sliding a little too far up for eddie's comfort.

peeling away from the man's grip, eddie says "not with you." he should feel bad for the guy, but he doesn't: he can't. not when richie's still staring at him from across the dance floor, hand sliding higher and higher up the blonde's leg.

eddie forces himself to look away and pushes through the mass of people.

the bathroom is almost empty and, despite the odd smell that came with being in a public restroom, eddie feels like he can breathe again. he still feels hot all over, and the vodka's got his chest heating up pink, so he leans over the sink and splashes some water over his face.

no amount of water can wash away the image of richie stained on the back of his eyelids.

the door to the bathroom opens. eddie doesn't look up: he knows who it is. a club full of hundreds of strangers, and he knows, he fucking *knows* it's richie. he'd be lying if he said he hadn't been hoping richie would follow; he'd be lying if he said he hadn't left knowing richie would follow.

it took two to tango, afterall.

“looked like you were having a good time out there,” richie says, and eddie stands up straight to catch the man’s gaze in the mirror. it’s blistering, makes eddie feel sticky hot all over, like richie’d brought the sun in with him. “made your friend pretty sad when you left, though.” through the reflection, eddie watches richie take a step forward. eddie’s hands grip the porcelain of the sink, but he doesn’t move — couldn’t if he tried.

“that sucks for him.” eddie clears his throat. “i’m sure your *friend* was pretty sad, too.”

“sucks for him,” richie repeats. he takes another step forward. “i was a little distracted by someone else, anyway.” eddie can feel richie’s warmth radiating off of his body, he’s so close now. eddie clears his throat again.

“oh?”

“yeah.” through the reflection, eddie watches — feels — richie’s hands find eddie’s hips. the touch is so soft, a barely-there grip that still sets eddie’s entire body up in flames.

“w-who?” richie’s hands are still moving, one flattening over his stomach and the other sliding down to eddie’s thigh. this is what he must’ve looked like, eddie realizes, pressed against that stranger as he danced. richie’s fingers dig in, sudden and possessive, and eddie can’t hold back the sharp whimper. a mirror image from the dance floor, except it was finally (finally, finally) richie pressed against him.

and eddie’s hard. really fucking hard, and richie’s barely touched him but eddie’s cock strains at the fabric of his shorts. he wants more. he wants everything richie will give him and then some. boldly, eddie presses back against richie’s frame, realizing with another whimper that richie’s just as hard as he is. eddie’s head falls back against richie’s shoulder and he squeezes his eyes shut.

i’m going to die in the bathroom of a gay bar and it’s all richie tozier’s fault.

“do you know how fucking good you looked out there?” richie asks, ignoring eddie’s question. lips brush against the shell of eddie’s ear,

breath hot against his skin. “in these little shorts— fuck, eddie, you almost killed me.”

“you should’ve asked me to dance,” eddie says, finding his breath before richie steals it away again when the hand on his stomach shifts, the tips of his fingers sliding under the waistband of eddie’s shorts. “i would’ve— fuck, richie.” richie’s a devil, a fucking devil, mouth trailing down the line of eddie’s arched neck before he’s biting down and sucking a fat, red mark on to the skin. “i would’ve said yes, i would’ve— ”

“i wanted to watch,” richie murmurs, and he sucks another mark onto eddie’s neck, and another, until eddie’s chest is heaving and he looks like he’s gone head to head with a vacuum cleaner. “look at you, eds. look how pretty you are.”

eddie does. he looks wrecked. five minutes in a bathroom with richie and he’s already fucking wrecked. there’s bruises along his neck, too many to cover, and his cheeks are flushed bright red. eddie’s eyes are so blown-out he can’t even see the ring of brown around them anymore. the only solace is richie looks just as fucked as he does. “so fucking pretty,” richie murmurs, and eddie’s so caught up in the hunger of richie’s gaze that he forgets they’re in public and when richie’s fingers curl around eddie’s length under the fabric of his shorts he moans so loud it echoes.

“oh fuck, richie, i— ” eddie can’t look anymore, it’s too much. his hand flies up to pull at richie’s curls in an attempt to stabilize himself, but all that does is make richie groan and push his hips forward. “we can’t— we’re in—” eddie’s brain is fucking malfunctioning; realistically he knows they shouldn’t be doing this here when someone could walk in at any time, but eddie’s hips don’t get the memo and he arches first into richie’s grip and then grinds back against his length because there’s so much richie and eddie wants it *all* , every fucking bit.

“could fuck you in the stall,” richie breathes against his ear, and eddie’s knees wobble. is he losing his mind? is richie tozier actually driving him off the brink of insanity? on any other day with any other man eddie would find the idea disgusting — the germs, the risk, the lack of a bed — but when he imagines richie fucking him up

against the stall, all of that falls away. *get ahold of yourself eddie, jesus, c'mon* . richie's wrist twists just right; if eddie doesn't get a grip he's going to come in his goddamn shorts before he's even gotten the chance to kiss richie. with all the strength eddie's got left, he pulls richie's hand away and turns around.

maybe he's panting with the effort; maybe it's just really warm in the bathroom.

eddie's going to say something — *let's get out of here? call an uber?* — but richie surges forward and kisses eddie silent. it's slow, and greedy, like richie's been waiting weeks to get his mouth on eddie's, and it's so hot that eddie whines into it before his brain catches up and he kisses richie right back. someone walks in — eddie can hear the door open and close, followed by the slam of the stall door — but eddie can't scrounge up any fucks to give. he's kissing richie tozier; the rest of the world can fucking wait.

richie tries to push eddie back up against the sink, and eddie wants it (really really wants it) but he knows if they don't leave right this second eddie's going to hate himself for letting richie blow his back out in a grimy club bathroom.

“no, no, c'mon, lets—” eddie pushes richie back, but richie leans forward to chase the feeling of eddie's lips. it's a lot fucking harder to push richie back for the second time (especially since he'd gotten his hand back down eddie's pants again) but the toilet flushes and eddie moves away so fast he knocks into paper-towel dispenser.

“take me back to the hotel,” eddie says, and he has to adjust himself so he doesn't show the entire club what he'd been doing in the bathroom. “and fuck me like you mean it.”

this time, it's richie's turn to whimper.

they had to take separate ubers to the hotel. eddie didn't have an

ounce of faith in himself or richie to keep their hands off each other for the ride, and eddie wasn't about to ruin some poor driver's night. that, and people had started to recognize the members of shark puppy even in the low light of the club, and eddie had enough sense to keep his and richie's faces out of the tabloids. patty had looked too busy on the dance floor with stan, and bev looked equally as busy with some girl in fishnets, so eddie had taken the lesser of all the evils and interrupted bill and mike's conversation at the bar to tell them he and richie were tired.

"tired, huh?" mike looked like he knew exactly what was happening, but bill waved with a big, drunk, clueless smile and told eddie to have fun before eddie practically ran out the door to catch his uber.

the pitchfork media building passes eddie's window during the short trip, and eddie pretends he can't see it. the memory of richie's hand on his thigh drown out sting's warnings with ease.

richie's not in the lobby, and he's not in the hallway either. it gives eddie just enough time for the rational part of his brain to start back up, to whisper maybe it's not such a good idea, but the minute eddie swipes into his room, richie's crowding him against the closing door and flushing all thoughts that aren't *richie richie richie* out of his head.

"bed," eddie mumbles between kisses, and richie makes a sound but doesn't do anything to start moving that direction. he presses eddie against the door even harder, actually, wraps one of those big hands around eddie's bare thigh and hoists it up around so their cocks grind together in a way so sinful eddie's brain goes blank.

eddie's not religious, but richie's dick might change his mind.

"fuck, richie, c'mon," eddie gasps, nails scrape against the bare skin of richie's flat stomach before his hands push up, up, bunching the fabric of richie's shirt into his armpits. eddie briefly mourns that he hadn't gotten a chance to really appreciate richie in his crop top, but then richie rocks his hips forward and eddie forgets whatever the fuck he was just thinking about. "*richie*."

"i love it when you say my name like that," richie rasps. eddie huffs out a laugh — or maybe a moan, he can't really be sure anymore.

“fucking narcissist,” eddie replies. he can feel richie’s grin against his neck, and that gives him enough energy to wriggle out of richie’s grip. “come on, i wanna suck your dick.”

“you’re going to fucking kill me,” richie says, but he follows. he always does.

richie tries to distract him after eddie gets richie naked. actually, eddie distracts himself first, eyes going wide when he tugs down richie’s briefs and finds the most beautiful cock he’s ever laid eyes on.

“jesus christ,” eddie moans, but richie interrupts eddie’s viewing party to yank at the fabric of eddie’s borrowed shirt.

absolutely zero finesse; eddie’s going to have to buy bev a new shirt.

richie gets eddie half naked and then pushes him onto the bed, sucks a big, purple bruise onto eddie’s thigh when he pulls the black shorts down eddie’s legs before eddie remembers he’s on a goddamn mission and he will *not* be stopped.

“get off me you devil,” eddie pants, arms weak when he pushes at richie’s shoulders. richie bites into the soft flesh of eddie’s naked thigh again, and his fingers dance towards where eddie’s cock lays flushed and hard against his stomach. “no no *no* . i’ve been thinking about your dick for weeks and i’m going to touch it, goddamn it.”

richie snorts. eddie regrets looking down, because richie’s looking right back at him through lashes that have no business being that long and pretty. “weeks?”

“shut up shut up shut — *oh* .” richie’s tongue runs flat and slow up the length of eddie’s cock, teasing like the stupid bastard he is. “i hate you.”

“you don’t,” richie says, and then he’s swallowing eddie down like he’d been training his whole life to suck eddie’s dick. it’s fucking phenomenal — eddie has to bite his lip to keep his thoughts to himself. richie’s head is big enough, there’s no need to enlarge it any further.

the way richie smirks around eddie’s cock makes eddie think it might

be too late for that.

richie sucks dick like he does everything else: it's enthusiastic, a little sloppy, and fucking loud. the sounds he's making are stupid hot, like he can't get enough of it, and when eddie's fingers thread into richie's sweaty curls, he somehow gets even louder. eddie knows they're going to get a noise complaint — or at least some texts from ben, whose room shares a wall — but he can't find a single part of him that cares. in fact, he starts pulling at dark strands just to hear the sweet way richie whines again and again and again.

"i hate that you're so good at this," eddie complains. "you've got a stupid mouth and i hate it, i hate you and your stupid, stupid mouth — *oh fuck* — i hate you so much. get off me, get off, i hate you." eddie tugs sharply at richie's curls and he pulls off with a gasp, that little smirk still curling at the corners of his lips, even with spit dribbling down his chin obscenely.

"i've wanted that for weeks, too," richie says, so genuine that eddie has to look away for a moment or his eyes might give away too much.

"what, me to call you stupid?" eddie jokes, deflecting, and richie laughs.

"yes, absolutely." eddie's going to say something else (he doesn't know what, exactly, but he's not used to richie being this quiet and it's weird and heavy and keeps making his heart skip in his chest) but richie starts trailing open-mouthed kisses up eddie's stomach instead. "i've wanted a lot of things for weeks," richie says between kisses.

"like what," eddie breathes, words hitching when richie's tongue flicks over his nipple. it's too much, and eddie decides he can't take it anymore, so he nudges richie off, trying to get some semblance of control here. richie lets him, too, lets eddie push him around until he's sitting with eddie's thighs straddling his lap and eddie's fingers wrapped around his length. "tell me. tell me what you want."

"*you* ," richie groans, a little dazed. "all the time. every fucking minute — shit, eds, do you know how impossible it is not to think about you?" eddie spends a lot of time telling richie to shut up, but

realistically, eddie could listen to him talk forever about whatever until they both died. “i think about fucking you every fucking day.”

“every day?” eddie starts to pump his hand around richie’s cock, revels in the way richie’s fingers dig into eddie’s ass so hard he knows there will be bruises tomorrow.

“shit, yeah. wanna fuck your mouth,” eddie very kindly stifles the urge to remind him that could’ve happened already. “and your thighs, god, wanna fuck your thighs. those fucking — oh shit — those *shorts* , gonna’ fuck you in those shorts, too.”

“gonna?” eddie hums, and swipes the pad of his thumb across the tip of richie’s cock to spread the wetness there. richie knocks his head against the wall, glasses sliding down the bridge of his nose. he looks, eddie thinks, stupidly adorable. “pretty confident. who says i’ll let you?” without warning, richie grazes his fingers across the sensitive skin of eddie’s hole. eddie’s wrist stutters and he mewls — fucking *mewls* — and richie has the gall to look smug.

“you’ll let me,” richie says, and he’s right. eddie hates him because he’s absolutely fucking right.

“if you don’t get your fingers in me right fucking now i’m going to lose my mind,” eddie huffs. he can feel beads of sweat on his forehead and he hasn’t even gotten richie’s cock inside him, which is just unfair. “please tell me you have lube or i swear i’ll go back to the club and find scallop breath.”

richie does have lube, which he yanks from the bedside drawer after he stops snorting about scallop breath. the first finger is easy; eddie would never admit it, not to anyone, but he may have prepped a little in the shower that morning. high hopes, or whatever, okay, it didn’t matter because it had all been worth it in the end. the second finger isn’t as easy. richie’s fingers were longer, thicker than eddie’s, and it took a second for the prickle of pain to fade into that pleasant stretch.

“yeah, yeah, right— fuck, now we’re getting somewhere.”

“yeah?” richie says, panting against his jaw. eddie feels a little bad for the angle of richie’s wrist, but richie’s still leaking against his

stomach so it can't be that bad. his fingers spread, scissor inside of him, and eddie gives a high, needy whine. the third finger is the least easy of all, actually hurts a little, but eddie doesn't care. he likes it. he pushes back against richie's fingers, rocks down onto his pumping wrist. they stay like that for a long time, eddie's breathing getting more and more labored with every brush of richie's fingertips against inside him until richie says "you gotta tell me when i can— "

"now," eddie pants, and he presses both palms against the wall in an effort to keep himself upright. "nownownownow— "

richie's wrist stutters to a stop, fingers slipping out. "are you— "

"don't you dare ask me if i'm fucking sure, if you don't put your dick in me right now— " the head of richie's length presses against eddie's hole, thick and hot, and eddie bites his lip as he lowers himself down, down. it's way too much at once and eddie burns, lungs empty.

he feels beautifully, incredibly, wonderfully full.

"good?"

"hold on, just need— "

"anything, yeah, take your time." eddie hums, presses his forehead against richie's until it doesn't feel so overwhelming anymore. richie's glasses are fogging up, but his eyes are closed behind them anyway, so eddie doesn't think it matters. "eddie, please tell me i can move. i think i'm gonna lose my mind if i have to— " eddie cuts him off with a roll of his hips that makes them both moan in unison. richie's fingers are locked in a death grip on eddie's thighs.

"c'mon rich," eddie says, trying (and failing) to sound unaffected. "thought you were gonna' fuck me."

"yeah well now i need a fucking second unless you want me to come immediately." eddie stifles his laugh against richie's shoulder before richie tilts his head and eddie's laughing against richie's lips. they kiss, slow and indulgent, until eddie's pretty sure the only things in the world are him, and richie, and richie's perfect dick inside him. eddie rolls his hips again and the feeling is so good he almost blacks

out.

“rich, richie, please,” eddie says, and richie bites at his bottom lip.

“yeah, okay,” richie says, and then he lowers his hips until it’s just the fat head pressed against eddie’s rim before he fucks back up. hard. eddie screams, just a little.

sorry, ben.

it becomes a team effort, then, eddie’s thighs burning with the effort of bouncing up and down as richie fucks his hips up off the bed. the sounds they’re making are filthy, a combination of skin on skin and eddie’s high pitched moans underlined by richie’s lower ones.

“fuck, fuck, fuck, yeah, shit, richie, fuck me, fuck, mother fucking— ”

“eddie, shit, so fucking tight, so good, feels so fucking good, eddie—
”

at some point eddie’s words stop being words and just turn into a garbled mess of vowels and noises that sound kind of like richie’s name. richie never stops talking though, even when eddie can feel his rhythm falling as he gets closer and closer to orgasm.

“eddie, baby, so pretty, taking my cock like that. so fucking good, so fucking beauti-” eddie covers richie’s mouth with his because it’s too much. too *sweet* . eddie can’t think about that right now — he can barely think at all, his cock’s so hard, but if he has to hear richie call him beautiful with his dick up his ass, eddie might actually factually pass the fuck out. or have a heart attack. or maybe be faced with the fact he likes richie a whole lot more than he should.

none of which are options eddie wants to entertain right now.

his orgasm hits him like a fucking train; richie slams up at an angle that makes lightning crack behind eddie’s eyes and he cries out, ropes of cum coating richie’s chest and stomach as eddie’s legs quiver with the force of it. richie isn’t far behind, either, and he hides whatever noise he would’ve made by biting eddie’s neck as he bottoms out. through the fog, eddie can feel it, richie’s cum filling him where he’s raw and sensitive and fucked out.

it takes five minutes for either of them to be able to speak again, let alone move. eddie doesn't even know if he *can* move; it feels like all of his bones have been replaced with jelly. or butter, maybe. something. eddie's brain's not working, he can't think of any good metaphors for the way he feels right now: he just knows he feels fan-fucking-tastic and entirely fucked out.

"so," richie says finally, and eddie sits up where he'd collapsed against richie's chest. "high five?"

eddie showers alone, with the door locked, ignoring richie's protests from the other side.

december 1st

- chicago, illinois

eddie wakes richie up an hour earlier than they're supposed to meet the losers for lunch. richie doesn't complain, and eddie finally gets richie's dick in his mouth. they show up ten minutes late, and patty and stan spend the entirety of the meal slipping hickey jokes into the conversation.

they shut up when eddie asks if patty made sure to secure the strap last night.

"i'm gonna watch the show tonight," eddie tells them before they all go out. richie's smile is blinding, shining rays of sunshine directly into eddie's heart. "i think. with patty. we're gonna watch. front row."

"pit seats, huh? close enough you might be lucky enough that you

can feel the band's spit." eddie flips richie off.

"b-but what about 'i fucked big bill?' we can't do it w-without you."

"don't worry, bill. britt said she'll give me a boost onto the stage when it's time." bill looks relieved. from over his shoulder, eddie can see alex dim the stage lights, which means the show's about to start. "i have to go find patty but uh—" eddie's nervous suddenly, like *he's* the one performing. it doesn't make sense, but for whatever reason, finally watching the show felt big. richie's looking at him like it's big, too, but eddie can't handle that so he looks at bev. "good luck out there. it'll be a great show, as always."

bev grins. "i dunno, i'm feeling a little nervous now that i know a big music critic's in the audience." eddie rolls his eyes. the stage is going completely dark — eddie's gotta go now or he'll miss the start. he turns, but bill pulls him into a hug, and suddenly they're all there, wrapping their arms around him until he's the center of a giant shark puppy sandwich. or cabbage — something with lots of layers around the middle bit.

ben pulls away first and he, the saint, helps eddie out of the hug, sends him on his way. "you better be cheering the loudest, eddie!"

patty's dead center, right behind the barricade with her legs and arms spread like she was saving the spot. "finally," she mutters, and britt gives him a nod as eddie jumps the barricade to stand beside patty just as the lights go out.

it's... the show is... shark puppy... well. it fucks. that's all eddie has to say about it. shark puppy fucking fucks. the lights, the projections, they're incredible on their own, but the people they're backing up are the stars. obviously, but like. *god*, eddie was getting a half — maybe even a quarter — of the entire experience when he stood backstage. watching them from the front was like witnessing a shooting star.

or, well, five shooting stars. whatever.

stanley's on fire the whole night, dancing behind his keyboard during every song without missing a single note. mike slays it on the bass, and at one point, richie takes over for him and mike literally —

literally — breakdances on stage. spins on his fucking head and everything. patty turns to eddie at one point like *can you fucking believe* and eddie just flails in response like *no i cannot fucking believe*

.

actually, richie ends up taking a turn at almost every instrument when he's not skipping around banging his glitter-coated tambourine. during *can't go back* he takes over bev's drum kit, and during *rock war* he steals bill's guitar as bill wails into the mic. stan doesn't give up his keyboard, but that doesn't stop richie from sneaking in to riff over his shoulder during *bike ride* . it's all very entertaining and, eddie thinks, *not* hot at all!

(it's very hot. eddie hates how attracted to richie he is the entire concert. richie keeps looking at him like he knows, too, which doesn't make it any better.)

deadlights is a newer song, added to the line-up about a month in, and richie sings the entire thing directly to eddie. at one point he kneels at the edge of the stage, mic gripped in his hand as britt dutifully holds up richie's torso so he could be face-to-face with eddie in the crowd.

you walked in and had me with a single look

one glimpse of your lips and i was hooked

i'm trapped, baby you shine so bright

please, please, free me from your deadlights

there's pictures snapping but eddie doesn't pay them any attention: he just laughs, wild and authentic, with hearts in his eyes, until britt's tired of being richie's prop and forces him back to the stage.

they're nearing the end of the set — bill's just finished *georgie* , which means there's only one song before encore — when eddie's phone rings. he's going to ignore it, but it buzzes incessantly, annoying him until he finally checks.

ben (10:01pm)

You need to come back stage

ben (10:01pm)

Important

3 missed calls from ben handsome

ben (10:04pm)

Eddie?

eddie frowns. something must have changed — clearly britt isn't going to heave him up on stage for the encore anymore, he's going to have to go back and enter the normal way. eddie kisses patty's cheek and points, not willing to waste his voice to scream when she wouldn't hear him anyway. she nods, and eddie hops the fence to go find ben.

“hey, i'm here. i didn't think i was going to have to leave until—” ben lifts his head from where he'd been staring at his phone screen, and his eyes are rimmed with red. like he's been crying. “whoa, what's going on? are you okay?”

ben's words are lost, dampened by the roar of the crowd as the final song finishes and the stage goes dark. “wait, what? i'm sorry, i didn't —”

richie and bill come screaming off the stage, and beverly follows close behind, leaping onto richie's back and screaming “shark puppy rules the world!” mike comes in with stan, who has somehow lost his shirt, and they join in the screaming too. normal post-show antic things.

“guys, i think something’s—” eddie looks frantically between bev and ben, who’s started crying again, and bev slides off richie’s back to run to ben’s side.

“ben? what’s going on? is it... does it have to do with—” bev raises her eyebrows at him to communicate whatever it is she’s trying to say, but ben shakes his head. “then what’s wrong? what’s going on?”

ben wipes his snotty nose with the back of his massive arm and tries to pull himself together enough to speak. “i-i got a call, and i couldn’t... i’m sorry eddie, i didn’t mean to stop you from enjoying the concert, but i didn’t think you guys would want to perform after —” ben sobs again. eddie’s heart is hammering in his chest and he has no fucking clue what ben’s talking about. a look to the others confirms they don’t either.

“why wouldn’t we want to perform, honey? who called you?” bev’s voice is soothing as she rubs a hand across ben’s back, and it takes another few seconds to gather himself again.

“i didn’t think you’d want to after you found out— after you—” ben sniffles, and now stan’s coming to put an arm around ben, too.

“found out what, ben?”

ben takes a shuddering breath. “that— that georgie’s dead.”

Notes for the Chapter:

haha..... anyways idk when the next updates coming
so good luck!

[pinterest](#) / [shark puppy merch](#) / [yell at me](#)

9. bill

Summary for the Chapter:

the losers are there, too. not eddie; pitchfork wouldn't give him the time or the pay to fly out and back, so he'd sent his condolences and a beautiful letter attached to an edible arrangement none of the denbroughs had touched. all of them, it seems, have lost their appetites. but the rest of them are there: bev, ben, stan, richie, and mike, huddled in a corner with their heads down and their hands in their pockets.

bill hadn't seen them since the show in chicago, when ben had broken the news through wet sniffles. bill doesn't remember what happened after that, not really. he thinks his brain just kind of shut off. he remembers bev asking *bill, bill, are you okay, bill* and eddie's wide, panicked look. he remembers the roar of the crowd calling for an encore, and zu's frantic *where's the band? hello? ben?* over ben's walkie talkie. he remembers mike's big hands cupping his face, telling him *i've got you, i've got you, it's okay*. everything felt like it was in a wind tunnel, rushing past bill so quietly he didn't notice and so loudly he thought he might go deaf.

and suddenly, he was on a plane back to derry.

Notes for the Chapter:

this is a mass apology to everyone. im sorry u had to read the end of last chapter, and im sorry u have to read this. lovey dovey romance picks up next chapter i SWEAR.....probably

when bill was five years old, he stepped on a butterfly.

it was an accident — and he was five.

derry, maine couldn't ever be described as beautiful. pretty, if you were stretching the truth; rustic, if you were twisting it. there was one week in the spring, though, one short week at the tail-end of april, where derry could almost grasp *beautiful* . it was that very week in spring — the spring that bill turned five in — when bill stepped on that butterfly. he was tumbling and bumbling over the grass (it took him years to learn how to move like something other than a baby deer, and even now he's still reminiscent of a newborn fawn) when, in his pursuit to catch the poor bug, big bill denbrough squashed it with his bare foot.

gentle hands replaced graceless feet as bill scooped the butterfly up and held it in the sunlight. it's wings twitched once, twice, and then it froze. "oh no," bill breathed. *had he done that?*

"m-mommy!" he didn't run after that. he was so slow and so careful, eyes flitting from the ground, to his friend, to the ground, to his friend, that his mom got tired of waiting and met bill halfway. "i hurt him. we have to help!"

"we can't help him, billy," his mother said softly. tender.

bill frowned. "wuh-what do you mean? wuh-we just need to fix his wings, o-or give him some water."

(how was she supposed to say this? how do you look down at cherub cheeks and big, blue eyes and explain that nothing lasts forever?)

"i... i don't think we can help him, baby." bill's eyes had gone a watery at that. and then they'd gone full on teary, big fat droplets that fell down his face and onto his shirt.

(how was she supposed to do this? just let him cry? was it so bad to entertain him, to make him feel like everything might be alright just so he didn't have to hurt so badly?)

"m-mommy?" bill asked softly, his eyes still big and wet even though his tears had dried up with a few hiccups some minutes before. the butterfly sat motionless beside the saucer of water they'd brought to the yard. *we tried so hard, billy. sometimes, though, sometimes you can't save things. sometimes it's too late.* his mother looked down from where

she sat at the top of the porch steps. “is it my fault? d-did i hurt it too bad?”

is it my fault?

(how was she supposed to answer this? how could she explain that it was, but it wasn't, not at all; how could she mend a broken butterfly heart?)

“no billy, it's not your fault. not one bit.” she said, and she opened her arms wide until bill sat on the step between her legs and laid his head on the round of her stomach. *there's a little baby in there, billy. you're going to be a brother.* bill wrapped his arms around his mommy and he held tight, fresh tears staining her shirt instead of his. she held him close, with soft hands and full arms; she held him until he stopped shaking, and then she held him a little longer.

“sometimes things happen. and there's nothing we can do to stop them. they just happen.”

—

december

- derry, maine

they used his old swim team photo in the obituary.

georgie was bald in that; shaved his head (and the rest of his body) alongside the rest of the team to raise awareness for... something. bill couldn't remember that part, just remembered georgie standing in the bathtub in his speedo, his friend attempting to do everything with an electric razor as bill leaned against the wall and watched, shaking with laughter.

in the picture, georgie was also mid-blink, one eye semi-closed and

wonky. he was smiling, at least, though that part of the picture was overexposed and made his mouth look too big, like an evil villain or a creepypasta monster from the stories richie used to send in the group chat. the point was, it was an awful picture of georgie; probably the only bad picture of him in existence. bill could've taken a better one with his shoe.

ha. georgie would think that's funny. i never can figure out cameras.

(bill has to remind himself to speak in past tense. sometimes he slips up.)

(a lot of times he slips up. every time. *every* time he thinks about georgie, he fucks it up, he says georgie *will* or georgie *is* when the fact is that georgie won't ever be anything anymore.)

they use a nicer picture for the funeral. georgie's smiling, big and bright, and that pile of blonde hair sits on his head again. if the picture was zoomed out, mary would've been in frame, too.

we would've used his senior pictures, his mother said. but they don't take those 'til spring.

bill doesn't know which photo is worse, really. the swimming team photo was bad, but in it's horrible depiction it brought distance. the good picture of him — the one where wind whipped his hair around the famous denbrough blues — that one feels so real, so close that if bill just closes his eyes, squeezes them real tight, maybe georgie will walk around the corner, ask what kind of boring party didn't have cake.

he won't, because ashes can't walk.

no one gets buried in winter, not in maine. the cold alone keeps the ground frozen december through march, at the earliest, which means if you die in derry after november you aren't seeing the inside of a casket until weeks, sometimes months have passed. cremation was the unanimous vote, even if bill didn't technically have a say.

there would be a headstone put in come spring, and bill doesn't want to think about having to go through all this again, but outside.

at least maybe in a field of gravestones he won't feel so claustrophobic. as it is, the funeral parlor is packed to the brim for georgie's wake. nearly the entire highschool is here; friends, teachers, bill is pretty sure he recognizes one of the cafeteria's lunch ladies. mary is here, too. when she'd arrived (one of the first, right after the bill and his parents had pulled in) she'd waved, and bill had waved back. they didn't hug — bill was trying not to hug anyone, not right away; not when he knew one squeeze too hard would have all the tears he'd held in bursting out every seam. mary must have felt the same, because she politely declined bill's mom's hug, and bill's dad's handshake.

zachary denbrough, stoic as ever, harsh wrinkles from years of uncontrollable anger turning flat and soft with the grief of losing a child. bill's never seen his dad cry; until recently, he'd never heard it either. the night bill got home from chicago, after his dad had driven him home and nodded curtly in lieu of a goodnight, bill heard it through the walls. long, harsh sobs that made bill pull the covers of the guest bed up over his ears and pretend he could hear the ocean: like he used to when it was dad's yelling instead of his crying.

his arm is around sharon, who looks the best she has since bill got home three weeks ago. which, really, isn't saying much: she'd put on some blush and combed her hair, but her skin is still sallow and she looked like she hasn't slept since the news had dropped. she probably hasn't. sometimes — after his father's cries had quieted for the evening — bill could hear his mom moving around in the kitchen. just moving things around, opening the fridge and closing it again. bill didn't pull the covers up like he did with his dad: he just listened, thought to himself *i should talk to her, i should say something, anything.*

he never did.

bill catches his mother's eye from where she and bill's father stand stiffly beside the portrait of georgie. she doesn't smile, and he doesn't either. bill looks at his shoes. bill's fingers are dug in to the side of a steep cliff, and if he looks at his mother for too long he'll surely lose his grip.

the losers are there, too. not eddie; pitchfork wouldn't give him the

time or the pay to fly out and back, so he'd sent his condolences and a beautiful letter attached to an edible arrangement none of the denbroughs had touched. all of them, it seems, have lost their appetites. but the rest of them are there: bev, ben, stan, richie, and mike, huddled in a corner with their heads down and their hands in their pockets.

bill hadn't seen them since the show in chicago, when ben had broken the news through wet sniffles. bill doesn't remember what happened after that, not really. he thinks his brain just kind of shut off. he remembers bev asking *bill, bill, are you okay, bill* and eddie's wide, panicked look. he remembers the roar of the crowd calling for an encore, and zu's frantic *where's the band? hello? ben?* over ben's walkie talkie. he remembers mike's big hands cupping his face, telling him *i've got you, i've got you, it's okay*. everything felt like it was in a wind tunnel, rushing past bill so quietly he didn't notice and so loudly he thought he might go deaf.

and suddenly, he was on a plane back to derry.

(the flight attendant had to tap his shoulder for bill to even realized they'd landed. he stared at the ground from the plane to the car, trying to forget that the last time he'd been at this airport georgie had been here, sending him off for tour; trying to forget that day was the last he'd ever hug his brother.)

bill hadn't responded to any of his friends' texts. they hadn't pressed, either: bill knows bev and richie both called the house phone to check up on everyone (re: bill) but he'd turned down the call when his mother offered the phone to him.

i think we're all feeling a little overwhelmed, she'd said to bev. *i think we just need time*, she'd said to richie. *don't forget to eat something*, she'd said to bill. *keep your strength*.

bill hadn't reached out, and yet here they all were: dressed in black to pay respects to the boy who used to glue googly eyes to their shoes when they'd come over after school. richie wears a suit, plain, and he's even skipped the dirty old vans in favor of real dress shoes — probably borrowed from stan. it made bill's stomach roll with nausea.

none of this is right. none of this is fucking right. bill hasn't seen richie without at least one ugly article of clothing since they were—since *ever* . he looks too stiff, too formal, like. well, like he's at a fucking funeral. richie notices bill staring and lifts his hand in a tiny wave, mouth half-smiling despite the sadness in his eyes.

bill thinks, suddenly, horribly, he might throw up right here on the carpet.

“s-scuse me,” he mutters, moving through georgie's classmates and friends with a stuttering sort of urgency, until he pushes out the front door and into the bitter chill. bill's left his coat inside but he's been numb for three weeks and not even the snow on the ground that seeps into the sides of his fancy shoes could shake him from that. against the brick of the funeral home, bill takes big, gasping breaths until the numbness seeps into his lungs, too, and he doesn't feel so much like vomiting anymore.

bill stands there for a long time. leaning against the wall, his feet shoved in the snow, his eyes closed. he stands there until he hears someone gently clear their throat from the sidewalk beside him, and he wonders which of the losers was nominated to go cheer up bill has-a-dead-brough.

when he opens his eyes, he finds it's not any of them at all. it's mrs. murrlyn.

“i'm sorry,” she says, and bill should be used to seeing the grief in people's faces by now but seeing mrs. murrlyn without a smile just feels plain wrong. “i don't mean to interrupt, but i—” she stops, rolling a crushed kleenex in one of her hands. everyone inside had them too, like fucked up party favors. bill hadn't taken any: why would he? he'd yet to cry for georgie: the fog that had settled in his bones seemed to cloud even his tear ducts. like georgie had died and taken bill's ability to feel anything with him.

“i just wanted to say that georgie was so— he was such a good kid, and he...” she can't find the words. bill knows the feeling. mrs. murrlyn takes a breath, tucking the beginnings of gray hair behind her ear. “well. he talked about you so much. about, um, shark puppy, and how lucky he was to have a famous brother who still wanted to talk

to him.” she gives bill a fragile smile that he can’t return. “we— i had them do a project on heroes, on who they looked up to, and he. well, he chose you. ‘the trials and tribulations of big bill denbrough’, he called it,” mrs. murrin says, eyes warm even as they glimmer with new tears. blood rushes, frantic and loud in bill’s ears. “georgie looked up to you so much. i know this is a horrible time, but i just... i wanted you to know.”

the look on her face says she’s done talking, but bill doesn’t have a fucking clue what to say.

you were georgie’s hero and you weren’t even here to save him.

“t-thank you,” bill says, more to the ground than anything. mrs. murrin nods, turns like she might head back inside and leave bill to have another breakdown in the snow, but she stops short.

“oh! i’m so absentminded these days, i completely forgot: i’m mrs. murrin, georgie’s teacher.” she holds out her hand and her mouth is still moving, something about *wanting to meet the famous bill denbrough* and *this must’ve been weird, a total stranger coming to you*, but bill isn’t listening.

“you r-really don’t remember me?” six years had passed, sure, but mrs. murrin had been his teacher for three years in a highschool where the average graduating class size was under 100 students every year.

mrs. murrin pauses, her hand still outstretched between them. something passes over her face, and her brows pull together. “i... i’m sorry? have we met before?”

“y-you were my teacher every year since sophomore english. you told me the hercules p-poem i wrote for class was the b-best use of color analogy you’d ever seen.” bill manages (just barely) to keep his lower lip from pouting out. “i made you a vase in ceramics class.”

mrs. murrin looks... floored. she stares at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed with that kleenex still squeezed in her palm.

then mrs. murrin does the most taboo thing one could do at a

funeral: she snorts. her hand flies up to cover her mouth but it's no use: she snorts again, the sound barely muffled against her skin. bill hasn't moved: mrs. murrin lets out a giggle, which turns into another, which turns into a full-on full-bellied laugh. outside the door of a room full of crying teenagers and mourning adults, mrs. murrin is clutching her sides and howling with laughter.

and then bill laughs too. small, at first, and then all at once, big hiccups of laughter that join with mrs. murrin's and echo down the empty street. it's so ridiculous, this whole situation happening at all let alone outside of a room so stuffed with sadness bill had nearly choked on it. it's absurd, but for the first time since bill had stepped off-stage in chicago, he feels... something. like mrs. murrin had squeezed bill's hand and chipped away some of the numbness inside of him.

they stay like that, laughing together on the sidewalk, until mrs. murrin's cackles turn to sobs and bill wraps his arms around his old high-school teacher, holding her as she cries.

—

a few nights later, bill digs his bike out from the garage and goes for a ride. it's freezing: even in the still air, a chill sneaks in between the holes of bill's big sweater and the cuffs of his jeans. the snow at least has been cleared from the streets, but there's still slick spots and bumps of ice that keep bill's fingers wrapped firmly around the handlebars.

derry's quiet. there's only two days until christmas now, which means after the shops close up at seven everyone locks up in the warmth of their homes to watch a lifetime movie and eat gingerbread cookies. normally around this time, the denbrough's home was alight with christmas cheer: twinkle lights along the roof, the smell of apple crisp wafting in from the kitchen, bill and georgie not-so-subtly shaking the gift-wrapped packages under the tree in an attempt to decipher the contents. this year, they don't even have a tree. there are no gifts,

and no baked goods. the denbrough home has become nothing but a shell.

bill rides and rides. he knows where he's going, but he can't bring himself to go directly there; he's been avoiding it purposely, not knowing if he could handle the pain all at once. eventually, though, he runs out of back-ways and hidden paths. eventually, he has to squeeze his brakes and put his foot down on the snow-dampened pavement.

(all roads come to an end; nothing lasts forever.)

neibolt street goes on for miles and miles, but at the end of it, there's a bend: a sharp turn that everyone took too hard, too fast. in the summer, it was a dare — a challenge. bill's dad used to come screaming around this corner and send georgie and bill into giggles in the back seat as they were thrown with the force of the curve. in the winter, with the ice, the dark, the meager bit of metal the town called a guard rail... in the winter, it was a death sentence.

it was georgie's death sentence.

bill lets his bike fall to the ground. the cold is worse up here: the small hill that neibolt bend sits atop leads directly to an edge of the quarry. if bill were to look, it'd be completely frozen over, frosted with last week's snow.

except for one fresh, cracked, gaping hole where they'd fished georgie's body out.

bill rubs his eyes. he won't look.

instead he looks at the ground, around the road, in the grass. he doesn't know what he's looking for (the car had been impounded weeks ago) and he can't see that well without a flashlight (he never could figure out how that phone feature worked) but he looks anyway. bill walks that entire stretch of road twice, three times, until his nose is red and his fingers are pale, tucked into his armpits to get any bit of warmth he has left. he wanders, looking for nothing, until that feeling building in his chest explodes out and he kicks a rock across the pavement with a frustrated "fuck!"

bill stops. closes his eyes. says it again, louder this time. “fuck!” and again, and again, louder and louder over and over until he’s screaming, until his throat is raw and he’s crumbling to the ground with nail marks pressed into his palms. bill’s shoulders shake, but the tears don’t fall. he lays there, in the middle of the road, trembling.

“i’m s-sorry, georgie,” he says. “i’m sorry, i’m s-so sorry.”

sometimes things happen.

“if i had b-been here, if i hadn’t left—”

and there’s nothing we can do to stop them.

“i should’ve been here,” bill says. “i should’ve saved you,” bill screams.

they just happen.

“i sh-should’ve. i—” bill’s breaths are labored, heaving out of him like punches. “i’m sorry.”

—

bill sits there until the glow of headlights pull up slowly around the corner, followed by the flash of red and blue.

“hey, kid, you gotta’ get outta’ the—” the cop stops when bill lifts his head. “oh— you’re uh.” the cop looks out over the edge, past the guard rail, and back to bill. big names in small towns; everyone knows everything. bill might be stupid, but he knows that look. “maybe it’s time to head home, son.”

bill nods, stands, ignores the awkward *sorry about your brother*, and jumps on silver to get the fuck away from there.

bill’s body knows where he’s going before bill does. it’s not hard to figure out, not really; he was always pulled this way, like a fly to

honey. bill recognizes the street names and the landmarks he flies past, but it doesn't truly register until he's staring at the big red door of mike hanlon's farmhouse.

it's mike's mom who answers when bill knocks (after walking back to his bike twice), a warm smile on her face. "why, if it isn't bill denbrough. come on in, baby, you must be freezing. you want some tea?"

bill politely declines, though the idea of a warm beverage is very appealing. there's a fire going in the corner, and the moment mrs. hanlon clicks the front door closed, mr. chips comes skittering around the corner, nails scratching against the floor and tongue flopping around wildly as he races toward bill. it's such an ugly, charming image, that bill can't help but smile when he's eventually tackled by a hundred and fifty pounds of fur.

"h-hey, buddy," bill says through tight lips, trying to avoid the tongue currently lapping at his chin.

"oh, mr. chips, leave the poor boy alone. down!" mrs. hanlon snaps and mr. chips dutifully retreats, but he ends up sitting at bill's feet when bill manages to get himself into a chair at the kitchen table. mrs. hanlon sets down a hot cup of water and a packet of tea anyways, and winks at him when he looks at her with grateful eyes. "i should've said before — mike's out gettin' some flour and honey for breakfast tomorrow. he should be back soon, but—"

"that's o-okay, mrs. hanlon."

"i've told you to call me jessica," she teases, and bill directs his smile at the table. there's something about the hanlon house that always makes him feel indescribably full. "now, what're you doing out so late?"

bill would hardly call eleven late, but it's also derry, and the middle of winter, so she has a point. he also doesn't want to tell her. what would he even say?

just went for a nice bike ride in the 20 degree weather to scream at the sky for a bit. no big.

“juh-just needed to get out of the house,” is safe enough, and mrs. hanlon — jessica — nods sagely, that knowing look in her eye. it must be a hanlon trait: bill recognizes it in her son, too. “s-sorry if i interrupted anyth-thing.”

“you are welcome here whenever you want, bill. you should know that.” he should. after spending so much time here during the summers (and falls, and winters, and springs, because wherever mike was bill wanted to be there too), bill was practically an honored guest. it feels different to be here without mike, though: kind of like he’s intruding in his own house. it’s odd and doesn’t sit right in his chest, but for reasons completely unknown to him.

bill is in no shape to try and parse through any kind of complicated emotion, especially not those tied to mike, so he isn’t going to try.

“thanks, muh-mrs— jessica.”

mrs. hanlon has never been the kind of woman to sit comfortably and *not* fill an awkward silence, but her words feel easy and warm, unlike the forced conversation bill had endured the entirety of the funeral. mrs. hanlon talks about the animals, and business of the farm, and mr. chips’ emergency surgery.

“never, ever, let a dog near a ball of yarn, bill denbrough. you hear me?”

after that story? bill shudders. “yuh-yeah, i hear you.”

she talks about mike’s cousins coming up for the new year (*if you’re still in town please come by, i know they’d love to see you*) and she talks about the new store they’re building in town (*it’s tacky and too big— what do we need two grocery stores for?*). before bill knew it, an hour had gone by, and mike still wasn’t back. an exhaustion bill hadn’t felt in weeks was setting in his muscles, and he knew if he didn’t go home now he’d end up passed out on the hanlon’s couch.

“i don’t know what’s taking that boy so long but he is gonna’ kick himself when he finds out he missed you,” mrs. hanlon says, taking bill’s untouched mug and dumping it in the sink. there’s a pause, like she’s debating whether or not to say something else, but she’s not

facing bill so he can't be sure. "he's been missing you something fierce these past few weeks."

bill swallows. of everyone, ignoring mike's texts has felt the most like betrayal. it's not that he doesn't want to talk to them, he just... doesn't want to talk to anyone. if bill could've avoided hearing his own thoughts, he would've: the past month has just been too much for him to bear. bill doesn't say anything, just tucks his hands sheepishly into his pockets. mrs. hanlon turns back to face him, and her eyes are so full and heavy that bill has to look away.

"he loves you, bill." bill's eyes widen and his heart thunders in his chest. could it be? a moment too late, she adds "and i love you too, baby. but you're his best friend." mrs. hanlon sets a kind hand on his shoulder, and bill lets himself ache for mike hanlon, just for a moment. the touch is gone as fast as it appeared, the woman disappearing into the back room before returning with a small box.

"here. don't open it until christmas!" she winks as she places it in bill's hand, like she knows he's going to bike a few hundred feet down the road and rip it open immediately. "it's from mike, but i was the one who flirted with the engraver to give us a deal, so i'll say it's from both of us."

the idea of mike's mom, even with the money they were getting from shark puppy's profits, haggling with some poor engraver in town makes bill's cheeks hurt with how hard he smiled. "thuh-thank you, mrs. hanlon."

"jessica," she corrects.

"jessica," bill agrees. mrs. hanlon tilts her head and bill gives her a polite kiss on the cheek before he's tucking the box under his arm, ruffling mr. chips' fur, and practically running back to his bike to get out of here before mike's truck comes rolling up.

suddenly, seeing mike feels like a mountain he can't climb right now.

bill bikes all the way home before he lets himself open the package. inside, on a tiny blue cushion, sits a delicate silver chain. bill lifts it

carefully from the packaging: it's too short to be a necklace, so he assumes it's a bracelet. it's beautiful on its own, clearly well made and probably a little more expensive than mrs. hanlon had let on. in the center of the bracelet, there is a thin rectangle; when bill flips it over, his heart squeezes tight. engraved in simple, looping script, was 's.s georgie' next to the outline of a paper boat.

by the time bill tucks silver away and hooks his new bracelet around his thin wrist, it's nearing half one in the morning. he stops into the kitchen to get a glass of milk — *or water, or juice, or maybe some of his dad's whiskey, just something to wash the salt of unshed tears from the back of his throat* — and he's not all that shocked to find his mother sitting frozen in georgie's old spot at the table.

"h-hey," bill says from the doorway. his mom looks up from where she'd been staring at the table. through tired eyes and a heavy heart, she smiles.

"welcome home."

bill stands there awkwardly, hoping desperately for the churn of words in his head to spit out something. it does, eventually, but instead of thanks or goodnight mom it's

"i went to neibolt edge." bill's mom's smile falters, falls, but she doesn't seem all that surprised.

"why?"

bill shrugs, and then he shrugs again. there's something rising in his stomach, and his chest, and right behind his eyes. a pressure that's been building since ben looked up at him with snot running down his face and changed bill's life with two words. "juh-just to look."

"did you find anything?"

bill shakes his head. he hadn't. there was nothing there: no scraps of metal, no wind-snatched hat, no sign that georgie denbrough had ever even been there, let alone died there. bill had thought maybe, if there had been something, something physical, something he could grasp, that it would all make sense — that he'd understand *why* .

“why?” his voice starts before the thought fully finishes, quiet in the dim kitchen, and his mom's shoulders fall. “wh-why did it have to happen? wh-why?” bill's voice trembles, and there's something clouding his vision: something that feels suspiciously like tears. “i d-don't get it, why wasn't i here to s-save him, why, why, why—”

“oh, baby, come here, come here.” his mother opens her arms but bill's already there, falling to the floor beside her before she pulls him up against her chest. “there was nothing you could've done, bill, you can't think like that—”

“if i h-had been here, i c-could've—”

“sometimes things happen, bill. and there's nothing we can do to stop them. they just happen.” his mother's hands soothe over the mess of his hair as bill shakes in her arms, finally letting the tears fall. “it's not your fault.”

bill cries against his mother's shirt, and cries, and cries, big fat tears falling down his cherub cheeks and runny nose dripping with every sob. and bill's mom holds him close, with soft hands and full arms; she holds him until he stops shaking, and then she holds him a little longer.

Notes for the Chapter:

thank u mickey, east, and jack. id be nothing without you.

(a little self-promo: if you follow my tumblr and want a customized it fic of your choice pairing/au, you can reblog [this post](#) for a chance at it!!)

10. eddie

Summary for the Chapter:

“you can’t start the new year by being a cranky bitch.”

“well i’ve still got—” eddie glances at his watch. “thirteen hours left of being a cranky bitch. and if i choose to bring that into the new year it’s none of your business.”

“it is my business because i’m the bitch who has to deal with your cranky bitch’s ass.” patty’s look softens. “have you talked to any of them yet?”

eddie knows what she’s really asking. *have you talked to richie?* he shakes his head.

“no, i—” the anger, the frustration that’s sat in eddie’s bones since sting’s phonecall almost a month ago now, fizzles down into something emptier. exhaustion, maybe: or defeat. “i don’t know how to tell them.”

Notes for the Chapter:

before we get into it, colleen made the most incredible hilarious (and accurate) [alignment charts](#) for the mosd!losers that you all simply must see.

okay i hope this makes up for 8 & 9 !!

late december

- chicago, illinois

stab. stab. stab. stab. stabstabstabstab.

“hey. there’s no need to kill it; the lettuce is already dead.”

eddie doesn’t respond. *stab. stab. stab.* if he’d brought a plastic fork, it’d surely be snapped in half by now. patty sighs.

“attacking your innocent salad isn’t going to do anything but ruin your tupperware.”

“i’ll buy a new one.”

“eddie.”

“what?” the fork clatters to the table, sending a few lettuce leaves flying. patty’s not bothered; she levels eddie with an unfaltering stare.

“you can’t start the new year by being a cranky bitch.”

“well i’ve still got—” eddie glances at his watch. “thirteen hours left of being a cranky bitch. and if i choose to bring that into the new year it’s none of your business.”

“it is my business because *i’m* the bitch who has to deal with *your* cranky bitch’s ass.” patty’s look softens. “have you talked to any of them yet?”

eddie knows what she’s really asking. *have you talked to richie?* he shakes his head.

“at all? not just to tell them that—”

“no, i—” the anger, the frustration that’s sat in eddie’s bones since sting’s phonecall almost a month ago now, fizzles down into something emptier. exhaustion, maybe: or defeat. “i don’t know how to tell them.”

shark puppy announced the morning after their chicago show that the remaining six concerts before their holiday break were canceled, though the final month of shows would continue as planned in the new year. disappointed fans took to twitter in troves; most of them were polite in their questioning, but there were some *very* passionate mothers expressing their anger over expensive tickets and the

unprofessional mid-tour break.

eventually, people got ahold of georgie's obituary, and the angry tweets disappeared as quickly as they'd come.

not that eddie would know: he'd deleted the app from his phone and blocked the site on both his work computer and laptop. well, patty had done it for him, holding him back with one hand and clicking delete with the other. *it's for your own good* she'd said. she was right, too: eddie hadn't been able to look away from the moment the first picture was shared.

there was only one at first. a single shot, taken from the side with a flash eddie only barely remembers. in the photo, he's laughing, eyes bright and shining and locked with richie's, whose hair is a mess with sweat and glitter and whose lips curl into a smile even around the words of *deadlights*. their skin is turned violet from the stage lights and gives the whole picture a dreamy glow — but it does nothing to hide the line of hickies trailing eddie's neck.

rookie mistake. eddie wasn't used to being known; he'd run an anonymous blog for years, it wasn't his fault.

the picture had been tweeted by some fan account, and then retweeted by about 700 other fan accounts, and then more pictures from other angles had surfaced of that moment on other fan accounts and then more fan accounts had retweeted those pictures, and if the pictures weren't enough, those same fucking fan accounts started making Connections. they started posting Theories.

Connections and Theories that, perhaps, richie tozier had been the one to give eddie those hickies.

once those Theories were out there, they grew. fans began looking at their pictures taken during performances of *i fucked big bill*, analyzing richie and eddie's body language with such scrutiny and detail even eddie felt the attraction between them was obvious.

(and, like, yes, it was obvious, fuck off, but eddie had thought he'd been doing a very good job of keeping it professional and not obvious. clearly, he'd been wrong.)

eddie's twitter had been growing in popularity amongst shark puppy fans since the *ifbb* video was posted, but it practically exploded after the concert photos started circulating. eddie's mentions and DMs were full of variations of the same, loaded query: *are you and richie tozier together?*

the call from sting had been more of a question of *when* than *if* , but knowing that didn't make it any easier for eddie to walk into his office once it happened.

i know you're in chicago. my office, 9am. dial tone.

realistically, eddie should've been prepared; he should've known the moment he laid eyes on richie that, eventually, he'd be fired. growing up in the environment he did, eddie was a professional at denying himself the things he truly wanted.

at least to the public eye.

sonia never wanted eddie to run, not ever, not with his asthma, so he didn't. when he walked to the library, eddie took careful steps all the way down the sidewalk, all the way around the corner, past the crooked tree and the orange cat that always sat beneath it. he walked until the houses blocked out sonia's view of him from her spot on the porch, and then eddie ran. sometimes, he didn't even feel like running; he just ran because he could, because no one was there to tell him no. elvira didn't want him to play anything but the classics in her home. *pop music is undignified and terrible on the ears, eddiebear, why don't you just stick to satie and mozart?* so he did. he learned every piece she wanted, and every piece johanness wanted, and that was it. until the house was empty and eddie filled it wall to wall with adele and sara bareilles melodies, or, once, the theme song of shrek, just to prove that he could. mr. sting didn't want eddie to sleep with richie, so he didn't.

instead, eddie fell in love.

"i'm not an idiot, kaspbrak," sting had said, and eddie disagreed but he was halfway to shitting his pants so he sat back in the chair opposite of sting's desk and kept his mouth shut. if there was even a sliver of a chance at keeping this job, he had to try. "so answer me

honestly. are you and that shark puppy kid fucking?”

eddie winced. he could make something up, tell sting it had been a drunken, one-night makeout, absolutely no dicks and absolutely no feelings. all of that, every bit of it, would’ve been a lie, but maybe, *maybe* it would be enough to save his job.

“we— yes.” when he was a kid, eddie took all of his punishments and verbal lashings with his eyes to the ground; some habits stuck. at least there’s a candy wrapper below mr. sting’s desk to focus on, something to keep himself from crying when he lost everything he’d ever worked for.

it was silent in the office, except for the tacky golf clock tick ticking away on the wall, until sting finally said something.

“come in early tomorrow. seven am.”

eddie looked up, confusion written all over his face. “what?”

“i’m moving you to editing. you can set up your shit at your new desk by sarah.”

“you’re— i’m being moved to editing?” fire ignited behind eddie’s eyes, rippling down into his jaw as he sat up straighter. an editor? seriously? and — don’t get eddie wrong, editing was important, and if sarah and the rest of the team didn’t clean up his tenses, j.p grazer wouldn’t be half the reviewer he was. but eddie was not an editor. he was a writer, he was a reviewer, he wasn’t some intern that sting could shove his greasy fist into and puppet around. “what, am i just supposed to supposed to stop reviewing albums now? i earned that position, fair and—”

“god dammit, kaspbrak, you’re lucky i’m not firing you on the fucking spot!” spit flew out of mr. sting’s mouth and silenced eddie. he was right: eddie *was* lucky. so how come he wasn’t relieved? pitchfork was his dream job; he should be happy to work there at all.

right?

“get out. move your stuff today or tomorrow, i don’t care.” dejected, eddie stood. “and you’re off the shark puppy tour.” eddie’s jaw

dropped.

“wh— what about—”

“you can finish the article with the information you have. i’m sure four months was plenty of time to put something together— unless you spent all of it with your fucking tongue down the singer’s throat.”

“mr. sting you can’t do that, i have to—”

“you are off the tour!” sting yelled, and eddie swallowed the lump that had begun to form in his throat. “i don’t want to hear another word about it. and if i find out you’re still talking to them— any of them— i *will* fire you.” he leaned across the desk, round face pinched and terrifying. “do you understand me?”

“but—”

“ *do you understand me?* ” eddie flinched.

“yes.” eddie’s shoulders sagged. his article, his friends, his whole world, it all slipped away. before he walked out, he turned.

“bill’s brother died. i’m supposed to go to his funeral.”

the unsaid question hung between them, but sting hadn’t said anything. that had been answer enough.

so eddie packed up his desk, and unpacked it again in his smaller, darker cubicle next to sarah’s in the editing wing. he’d ordered an edible arrangement (and hated himself, *hated* himself for it), wrote a letter, and called bill’s phone to leave a message that he wouldn’t be able to make it. *work things —no flight money, no time off.* he’d accepted sarah’s homemade vegan gluten-free sugar-free fun-free cookies (“*welcome home!*”) and he’d let them go stale on the counter of his apartment until he threw them away. he fell back into routine for weeks, breaking only for a small, drunk christmas with patty and a few of her friends. he woke up, he went to work, he edited, he went home, he went to sleep.

he didn’t answer the texts and emails from any of the members of

shark puppy.

especially not richie.

—

usually, patty and eddie split an uber back to the apartment after work, but she'd left early to get ready for a new year's eve party, so he packed up, wished sarah a happy new year's, and tipped the uber driver extra for driving in the awful weather.

eddie'd been invited to the party too, had made a dish to bring and everything, but had opted instead to sit on his couch eating buffalo wing dip and getting drunk alone. at eleven on the dot, eddie's phone rings. the familiar, unattractive photo of richie's nose appears on screen, and eddie hesitates with his mouth full of chips. it rings, and it rings, and eddie stares until eventually the photo winks out.

perhaps it is the wine's fault, or perhaps eddie's just too tired to deny himself anything anymore. whatever the reason, eddie grabs his phone and shakes it until the screen brightens and he can click accept.

“— seriously, shrimp up the nose, who would've—”

“hey.”

richie's voice stops mid-sentence, a hiccup of breath the only thing separating whatever he was saying before and his next rush of words. “you picked up! jesus, thought for a moment i was going so crazy i'd started hearing voices.”

“more than the usual ones, you mean.” it makes richie snort, which makes eddie smile. he hates the way his heart tumbles around in his chest: a dryer full of shoes that clack against flimsy metal walls. it's quiet, so eddie rushes to fill it with a question — “what're you doing calling me on new year's eve?” — because richie only gets quiet when he is thinking about something. eddie isn't in the mood to

know what richie is thinking about; it feels dangerous. richie doesn't skip a beat.

"not eve anymore! not in maine. we're living in the future, spaghetti-o, just waiting on you to catch up."

"well, happy new year then," eddie says, and takes a swig directly from the bottle — you know, in celebration. "future man."

"i can almost hear you... you sound so far away... like you're still in 2017... drinking cheap wine..."

eddie gives an offended scoff. "i am *not* drinking cheap wine!"

"oh? you're right, how terrible of me to assume. what *are* you drinking?"

eddie glances at the bottle of pink moscato on the table: the one he'd picked up from wal-mart that day. he clears his throat, pulling the bottle into his lap for easier access.

"um." *god, what's a fancy wine? what's a fancy anything? fuck.* "shh... champagne."

richie doesn't sound convinced at all. in fact, if eddie were to make a bet, he'd say richie's got that big tozier grin on. "champagne? love champagne. what brand?"

fuck. eddie doesn't even know a brand he could pull out of his ass for this— he doesn't think he's ever even had champagne. he groans. "yellowtail?"

"aha!" richie crows. "i was right! pink moscato, huh?"

"i don't know how you know that."

"it's the only thing you ever ask bev to get for you when we have nights off," richie says. then, a beat too late. "cos it's your favorite."

it is his favorite, and maybe anyone with eyes would know that but it doesn't stop eddie from flushing. richie's going quiet again. *nope, switching gears.* "what are you drinking?"

“the sweet, sweet juice of life, chap!” reddie drops the voice, thankfully. “i ate an entire platter of cocktail shrimp and please, believe me when i tell you shrimp and alcohol do not mix.” eddie has a feeling there’s a story behind that, but he can’t be bothered to ask about it when he’s too busy thinking about richie sitting alone with a mouthful of shrimp on one of the biggest party holidays of the year.

“what, no party?”

“i *am* the party, eds.”

eddie snorts. “right.”

“but i did let went and maggie have a shrimp or two before they went to bed. please, *please* don’t let me get old.” richie swaps to a whisper. “they went to bed at seven-thirty, eds.”

eddie gasps, scandalized. “no!”

“yes!” richie sniffs, and eddie imagines he’s blotting away invisible tears, too. “old people are *so* sad.”

it’s comforting, somehow, to know that richie was alone tonight, too. it feels a little like maybe they are alone together.

“you ate a full ring of cocktail shrimp by yourself and you weren’t even drunk. i don’t think you get to make fun of your parents.”

“they’re old, they can’t hear me anyway.” eddie laughs. *you’ve missed this*, his traitorous brain reminds him. whatever. sting doesn’t trace his phone calls (as far as he knows) so eddie will allow himself this; it’s a holiday, after all. too late, eddie realizes that richie has gone quiet again, and he misses the chance to curve the conversation again.

“kinda wish i *was* drunk, though. might make it easier to tell you i miss you.” richie’s voice is too honest; eddie kind of wishes he’d done it in one of his characters, just to take the weight off. eddie pulls at a loose thread on the blanket in his lap.

“richie, i—” the words catch, stuck in eddie’s throat.

“i’m sorry, that was— i just meant i’m glad you picked up is all, things have been—”

“i miss you too,” eddie says finally. “look, i’m sorry i haven’t responded, work is just—”

“you don’t have to explain, eds. i get it. things are— you know. i get it. bill didn’t pick up until tonight either.” eddie’s stomach sinks. he feels like an even bigger asshole than before.

“how is he?”

“better, i think. i mean, not much — can’t expect him to be. but he called, so. progress, right?”

“right.”

“he said he’s ready for the tour to start back up, which is good. probably needs the distraction, you know?”

“you *are* a good distraction,” eddie says, eyes going a little wide at how suggestive it came out. “because you’re annoying, i mean.” *yeah, nice save.* “you always bothered me when i was trying to sleep.”

richie must take pity on eddie, because he glosses over the vague innuendo (something he never, ever does) and groans. “don’t remind me. i, personally, am not ready to go back to sleeping on the bus, but,” richie’s voice takes on something akin to, what, bravery? eddie’s brain is swimming from the moscato. he puts the bottle back on the table. “i will do it for him. i will break my legs to fit those shitty cubby-bunkbeds for bill denbrough.”

eddie shakes his head, smiling for no one but the empty space in his living room. “you really are a hero.”

“i really am.” and then, faux-seductively “you know any princesses that need saving?”

“whichever one you’ve got locked up in your basement,” eddie says, and richie’s surprised laugh booms through the phone.

“touché, eds. but uh, i meant more like princesses in other places.”

eddie bites his lip. “like chicago, maybe.” *do not smile*. “really feisty princesses with pretty eyes who drink shitty wine and eat airbourne gummies like candy.”

“do you know how easy it is to get sick when you’re travelling? do you know how much shared air you breathe on those busses? and i’ve watched bill come out of the bathroom with dry hands, i can tell when he doesn’t — stop laughing!” richie doesn’t, but he makes a very valiant attempt to stifle it. “besides, this princess doesn’t need saving.”

richie hums, amused. “what about *distracting*?”

eddie chokes. he should’ve known richie wouldn’t have mercy. “i—” eddie smacks his lips, takes a breath. “what could you possibly mean by that?”

“don’t know. we could figure it out as we go along. see what *pops up* .” childish, disgusting humor, that still has eddie, for whatever reason, biting back giggles.

“richie! it’s a holiday! i am *not* having phone sex with you.”

richie gasps. “my heavens! phone sex was the furthest thing from my mind.” a southern belle, prim and sweet and horribly executed. “i’m just an innocent little lady, eddie kaspbrak.” the voice drops. “but now that you’ve mentioned it, i wouldn’t say no.”

“i’m busy,” eddie says. he’d never even had phone sex: what was he supposed to do? just... moan? “i’m watching the ball drop.”

“you can watch *my* balls drop.”

“ew, richie!” he giggles anyway, nervous and tipsy and, if he was being honest, thinking about richie’s balls now. “no way. no. way.”

“c’mon, eds,” richie says, teasing. “ask me what i’m wearing.”

“i don’t want to know the answer.”

“fine.” *thank god*. “what’re you wearing?”

no, no, no. you are not having phone sex with richie: you are going to hang up and block his number and go back to your buffalo chicken dip and—

“pajamas,” eddie says.

“oh, very sexy. tell me, is it a floor-length nightgown? floral print, lace trim?”

“ugh, beep beep richie.”

“i’m a very visual person, eddie, i need details! i mean, i’m happy to picture you in a nightgown, but—”

“a t-shirt and shorts.” eddie looks down. “blue socks.”

“very sexy indeed, spaghetti.”

“oh, fuck you. i’ve never done this before,” he huffs, and then realizes his mistake when richie starts with his smarmy *oh i can teach—* “nevermind, um. they’re— they’re the red ones. the red shorts.”

“shit,” richie says, and eddie thinks he hears richie flopping back on his bed. richie never did anything with grace: he might’ve been honest-to-god allergic to it. “you almost killed me first time i saw you in those. you bent over and i swear i saw god, right there on the fucking bus.”

eddie rolls his eyes, but the smile doesn’t go away. “yeah, i know. i did it on purpose.”

richie groans. “you are so evil. you and those little fucking shorts. do you know how hard it was to not just skip the club and push you back into the hotel room that night?” suddenly, eddie’s filled with memories: richie, with his hand on eddie’s thigh; richie, with his mouth on eddie’s neck; richie, with his cock against eddie’s—

“we got there eventually,” he says, resolutely ignoring the way his dick’s starting to take interest. “if we hadn’t gone to tuxedo jack’s, we wouldn’t have met those nice people out on the dance floor.”

“yeah, i’m sure you would’ve been real sorry for the loss of — what’d

you call him? scallop breath?” eddie’s touched richie remembers the nickname, but richie keeps talking before he can say as much. “if we hadn’t gone to tuxedo jack’s i could’ve sucked your dick for, like, twice as long.”

“or i could’ve gotten to suck yours like i was supposed to in the first place,” eddie says, and there’s annoyance in his tone but its all breathy and not coming out the way eddie wants it to; he’s too busy thinking about richie’s dick to be angry about anything.

“fuck, eds, if you had sucked my dick i would’ve never gotten to fuck you,” richie says, voice strained. “you were killing me. i thought i was going to cream my jeans in the bathroom, you looked so fucking hot. one look at your lips around me and i would’ve been gone.”

eddie’s bright pink, he knows it. a little color from the wine, a little from embarrassment, and a whole lot from the way richie’s voice is getting lower and lower as they talk. emboldened, eddie shifts on the couch, lets his free hand rest conspicuously close to the hem of his shorts. “i guess i’ll just have to wait until next time. when i can make sure i get what i want.”

richie sucks in a breath through his teeth. “what do you want?”

“to suck your dick, asshole,” eddie says, and richie laughs.

“that can be arranged.”

suddenly curious, eddie asks “what do *you* want?” it comes out in a rush, mostly because eddie’s still not sure how this works, but he knows he wants to hear richie talk.

(the irony of it all, of all the times eddie says *beep beep* or tells him to shut up, is that eddie could listen to richie talk forever, probably.)

“you to suck my dick, asshole,” richie volleys, and it’s eddie’s turn to laugh. “fuck, eds, i want a lot of things.”

eddie takes a breath. “tell me.”

that is, apparently, the only green light richie needs.

“i do want you to suck my dick,” he says, a little more serious, a little more earnest. “ i’ve wanted it since you walked out of that elevator. so fucking cute, with those freckles and your cute little mouth— wanna come on your freckles. wanna come in your mouth too, shit.”

don’t call me cute is at the tip of his tongue, but instead he says, breathy and soft “i want that too.” richie groans, and eddie has the sudden, crystal-clear image of richie with a hand around his cock. eddie presses his palm to his crotch and holds back the sound that threatens to escape. “are you— are you touching yourself?”

“have been since you mentioned those shorts, eds, i’m only human. couldn’t stop thinking about your ass— you’ve got such a cute little ass.”

“what else—” eddie swallows, his hand slipping beneath the hem of his shorts. “what else do you want?”

richie groans again, and eddie wraps his fingers around his length. “wanna get my hands on your ass again. you took my fingers so well, eds, gonna take it nice and slow next time. get you all worked up with one and make you beg for the second.” *jesus* . eddie’s cock twitches in his grip. he slips it out from beneath the elastic of his shorts, feeling indescribably dirty for whipping out his dick in the middle of the living room. “bet i could get you to come just from that, just from my fingers fucking you open. wouldn’t even let you touch yourself; just wanna see you fall apart on my fingers. my mouth, too, if you’d let me. would you? let me eat you out?”

eddie honest-to-god whines. it’s not something anyone’s ever done to him: the dedication to music school and his work had meant eddie tended to lean towards a handful of one-night-stands, none of which had even offered. the thought of richie between his thighs, mouth pressed against his—

“i’ve— fuck, no one’s ever— yeah, i would, i would.”

“shit, i’m gonna eat you out then. get you all wet and fuck you with my tongue until your legs are shaking.” it’s so filthy, so explicit, and when had it turned from wants to promises? eddie’s legs fall open thoughtlessly, and he thumbs the tip of his cock to spread the

wetness there. “you touching yourself, eds?”

“no,” he lies. “falling asleep, actually.”

richie huffs a laugh. “doesn’t sound like it. sounds like you’re jacking off to my voice.”

“that’s disgusting, richie i would—” eddie twists his wrist just right, and it pulls a shuddering moan from his lips. “i would never.”

“you sound so pretty when you moan like that, baby,” richie says, voice raw, and eddie’s eyes go half-lidded as he moans again. “can’t stop thinking about how you sounded that night, riding my dick. those little noises, fuck, sounded so needy.”

“i was ,” eddie breathes, hand moving faster over himself because he’s getting painfully close embarrassingly quickly. “i mean jesus, richie, have you seen your dick?”

“once or twice.”

“fuck you,” eddie says, and then “fuck *me* . can’t wait for you to fuck me again, seriously. think your dick ruined me forever.” it’s dangerous to be giving richie this kind of information, but eddie can’t bring himself to care. “next time you’re doing all the work though, my thighs burned for two days.”

“oh? you want me to hold you down and fuck you, huh?”

eddie whines again, throws his head back against the couch and almost drops the phone. “shut *up* .”

“i will. i’ll press you into the sheets and — *god* — fill you up and fuck you until you scream again.” richie’s breathing is just as heavy as eddie’s now, and eddie wonders what he looks like right now: if his glasses are slipping down his nose, if his curls are sticking to his forehead, if he’s bucking up into his hand like eddie is now. “fuck, eds, i’m close.”

“already?” eddie teases, like he’s not too, like his voice isn’t trembling with the effort of holding back.

richie laughs: desperate, torn open. “eddie, you’re killing me.”

“say something,” eddie says. “anything, say anything, i’m close, i’m gonna—”

“c’mon baby, come for me, come on my dick, let me take care of you. gonna hold you down, gonna fill you up and come inside you, fill you with that too. oh, shit, eddie—”

“*richie—*” and eddie’s hips bow up from the couch with the train-hit force of it when he comes messily, all over his hand and the fabric of his shirt, moaning richie’s name over and over like a mantra. he can hear richie, too, broken sounds pressed between the phone and the pillow.

“so close—”

“come for me, rich,” eddie says, drained, and richie does as he’s told with a whimper and a gasp.

eddie feels gross immediately, and he says as much.

“oh, i—”

“fuck, no, i just meant—” eddie laughs, a little crazed. “my hand’s covered in come, idiot.”

“oh, right. yeah, me too.” richie sounds stupidly proud of it, too, a little dazed from the high. “s’okay, next time i’ll be there to lick it off. a good ol’ tongue-bath to clean you up.”

“ew, richie, you make it sound so much worse than it already is.” eddie grabs a napkin from the coffee table and wipes his sticky hand against it awkwardly. everything’s a little more difficult with only one hand free.

“it’s a talent,” richie says.

there’s another moment of silence between them where he can hear richie grabbing tissues and eddie’s cleaning himself up and tucking his dick away too. eddie wonders if he should say something. thanks, maybe? did people say thanks after phone sex? eddie wouldn’t say

thanks if richie'd actually fucked him, but maybe there was a whole phone-sex etiquette he was supposed to be following here and he just didn't know.

"i can't wait to see you," richie says, interrupting eddie's thoughts. "seriously. got kind of used to seeing you every day."

eddie's chest squeezes dangerously, like someone's sitting on his lungs and eddie's slowly running out of air. *you have to tell him* .

the thing was, eddie had gotten used to seeing richie every day, too. all of them, actually: bev, bill, mike, ben, stan, even zu and alex and britt and the rest of the crew. richie especially — richie *always* . eddie's time on tour has... well, as corny as it sounds, it's changed his life.

and now it was over.

"i'm not coming back. on tour." eddie says it in such a rush he bites his tongue, but he barrels through the pain before richie can butt in. "pitchfork— they're keeping me here. you — shark puppy's finishing the last month without me. i'm not coming back."

richie's confusion is clear, even through the tinny sound of a phone. "but... why? what about the article? wasn't that the whole point?"

"i'm writing it from chicago. i should have enough information to—"

"yeah, but why? why now?" richie's voice is equal parts frustrated and distressed, like he already knows the answer. he must; sting had made the connections, and richie is a million times smarter than sting even on a bad day.

eddie doesn't give an answer because richie doesn't need one. richie scoffs.

"fuck that. no way, we're not finishing the tour without you. it would just be wrong. bill won't do it without you. i won't either. none of us will."

"yeah, i don't think forming a picket line is gonna work. i fucked up, richie, this is my fault."

richie makes an aggravated sound, mostly because technically eddie's right. "it doesn't matter. we can't do this without you. you've gotta change his mind."

"trust me, i tried." eddie sighs, his eyes closing as he lays back against the couch pillow. "i need this job, rich. i've worked my ass off for years; i can't lose it all now." eddie loves his job: even though for the last few weeks eddie's felt like he's drowning, even though hearing richie's voice has been the only thing to pull him from the stagnant trance, he couldn't lose it. he couldn't lose j.p. grazer. "can we just... talk about something else? aren't you supposed to be distracting me?"

"don't know if i'm ready for round two just yet, eddie," richie jokes, but some of the humor is missing. eddie wishes he could go back to that night at tuxedo jack's — not to stop it from happening, but just to live in that moment. maybe for the rest of his life.

eddie softens, breaks. "can we just talk? i know you're already out there, living in the future, but i've still got half an hour and i don't want to start next year covered in come if i'm not talking to you."

it's as close as eddie can get to the truth right now with that weight on his chest, but it makes richie laugh, so it must be good enough. "you really know how to sweet talk a guy, eds."

eddie falls asleep twenty minutes into next year with his phone in his hand, and richie forgets to hang up until he falls asleep too.

—

january

- chicago, illinois

shark puppy returns from hiatus tomorrow, and eddie is sitting at his desk in the editing wing, waiting to die. he's so bored he might already be dead, actually. eddie pokes a letter on the keyboard, but

his finger doesn't go right through it like a ghost's would. disappointing.

"how ya doin', hot shot?" patty looms over him, iced coffee in hand. eddie takes it graciously and downs a quarter of it before answering.

"dying, thank you for asking."

"stan says richie says you still have time to talk to sting."

"tell stan to tell richie he has time to eat my dick." eddie pokes another key. nope. still alive.

"i'm not your messenger, tell him yourself."

"well how come you're stan's messenger?"

patty grins. "i like stan."

eddie rolls his eyes with a little "ugh," before he pushes back on his roly chair and stands, setting his coffee down and stretching. he's still shorter than patty by a few inches, and she's only got her wednesday heels on.

"you know eddie, i never thought you were a quitter." patty places a hand on her hip and furrows her brows. "actually, i'm pretty sure the whole reason we became friends is because you didn't give up on your dreams."

her tone is mocking, so eddie flips her off, even if she's sort of right. "we became friends because i held your hair back when you got food poisoning my second day."

"which never would've happened if you didn't whip out your dick and tell me you were j.p. grazer!"

"yeah, well, if i get fired, j.p. grazer is dead, so there will be no—" eddie waves his hand around. "dick whipping."

patty looks genuinely confused now, her hand dropping from her hip. "what do you mean?"

“when sting hired me, i had to sign like six contracts. basically, pitchfork owns the name and identity ‘j.p. grazer’ now, so if i’m fired, or even if i quit, i could never write again.” eddie kicks one of the wheels on his chair, sets it spinning into the cubicle wall. “the whole career i built, gone.”

patty’s looking at him with that face she makes right before she calls him a dumb bitch, but she doesn’t say anything.

“what?”

“nothing, nothing.”

“don’t do that to me, patty.”

she give him that Look again, but it softens into something else. “you should talk to sting,” she encourages, and follows it up with a soft smack to the arm. “before it’s too late.”

there was no point in it, in any of it, but he knew patty was going to stare at him Like That for the rest of his life if he didn’t at least try. eddie throws his hands up, exasperated. “fine. but when i come home tonight with sting’s foot even further up my ass, you’re buying me ice cream.”

“deal,” patty says, and when eddie slips past her on his way to the elevator, she pinches his butt. “go get ‘em, tiger!”

ari, sting’s newest assistant, smiles brightly when eddie comes off the elevator. eddie likes her; he liked all of sting’s assistants. they just always quit after two weeks or so of getting shit on by their boss so often. ari’s been here three and a half, though, so eddie’s praying she pulls through.

“you can go on in, eddie!” she says, and eddie’s grateful for the kindness. it makes him feel less like he’s taking a dive into a pool full of hungry sharks, and more like he’s taking a dive into a pool with just one hungry shark.

so, not really much better, but still. he’s grateful.

“i told you i didn’t want lunch until after the— oh. kaspbrak.” sting

blinks, but waves him in nonetheless. eddie closes the door behind him. “what brings you to my office?”

“i—” eddie stops. takes a breath. “sir, i think you should reconsider.”

“what? the editing duty? there’s only three more weeks until you’re back on review crew, i’m not changing my mind.”

“no, not about that, i mean about—” eddie gestures vaguely. “going back. to the tour. i think you should reconsider, i think you should—”

“no.” sting goes back to the stack of papers in front of him. he doesn’t look up again. eddie falters.

“what?”

“i said no.” eddie watches, frozen, as sting turns a page. “you’re done with shark puppy. you finish the article, you turn it in, and it’s over. the end. now get out of my office.”

so that was that. no more shark puppy. no more richie, no more bev, no more bill or mike or ben or stan, no more road trips or sold-out shows, no more late nights circled around richie and his harmonica as the rest of them drunkenly sang made up songs. no more sneaking around with bev trying to catch alex and zuz making out before a show, or sneaking around with stan trying to overhear bev and ben’s hushed conversations on the bus. the last four months had opened up an entire new world for eddie, had opened doors and turned on lights that he never even knew existed. and now, it was over.

and for what, a fucking job? a job that, the more he thought about it, he didn’t even know that he wanted? a job that he’d begun to hate coming to (or maybe he’d always hated it, at least a little — maybe he’d only stayed for patty and the pay for writing what he wanted to write)?

fuck that.

j.p. grazer had started because eddie couldn’t bear to attach his name to what he wrote. j.p. grazer was a shield; it was safe. j.p. grazer had been invented because eddie kaspbrak was too mortified to post with his real name attached and risk not only his grandmother finding out,

but the rest of the world, too. j.p. grazer had been invented because eddie kaspbrak was scared.

but eddie kaspbrak was no longer scared.

eddie kaspbrak had sang on stage in front of thousands of people about having sex with a member of shark puppy. eddie kaspbrak had grabbed richie tozier by the face and kissed him in a goddamn public bathroom. eddie kaspbrak had stood in the front row of a shark puppy concert wearing hickies like medals of honor, and he'd watched as his face was painted all over the internet without an ounce of fear; maybe a little regret, but no fear. eddie kaspbrak wasn't afraid of sonia anymore, and he wasn't afraid of elvira anymore, and he sure as shit wasn't going to be scared of some greasy, low-life pitchfork asshole anymore.

eddie kaspbrak might have been all of j.p. grazer, but j.p. grazer wasn't all of eddie kaspbrak.

“fuck you.”

sting looks up from his papers, mouth twisting. “excuse me?”

“i said fuck you. i quit. fuck you.” eddie's face is calm, even, despite the storm raging beneath the surface.

sting laughs once, cold and empty. “are you sure about that?”

“yeah. yeah, i'm fucking sure about that. i'm so sure about it that—” eddie reaches into his back pocket and tugs out his wallet, ripping out his employee I.D so fast it sends a couple of craft store coupons flying when eddie flings it to the floor. “there. and fuck you.”

sting stands, anger sizzling and boiling and popping to the surface. “if you walk out that door, kaspbrak, your career is over.” then, with a crooked, leering smile, he adds. “j.p. grazer will never write again. you know that? all you've worked for—”

“oh, shut the fuck up. i don't care about your stupid evil villain monologue. i don't give a fuck— take it, take j.p. grazer, it's just a goddamn name and you know it! it's yours now; i don't want it anymore.” eddie's not so calm anymore, chest rising and falling

heavily with the waves that crash inside him. “i quit. forever. consider this my official resignation letter.”

and then eddie flips him off and walks out the door.

eddie walks directly to the elevator, past a clapping ari, and takes it all the way to the ground floor, not even bothering to grab his coat from his desk. eddie walks so fast out of pitchfork media inc. that he’s nearly running when he bursts through the doors and into the busy chicago street. and then he does run; he runs down the sidewalk so fast he barely dodges the pedestrians in his way. eddie runs away from pitchfork and away from the voice in his head (sonia? nana? some horrifying mix of both?) screaming that he’s ruined it all for good. he runs until he has to stop, has to lean against the window of a mcdonald’s and pull out his inhaler just to make his lungs remember how to function again.

when he catches his breath (and waves a quiet, embarrassed apology to the terrified looking woman who’d been trying to enjoy her burger on the other side of the glass) eddie pulls out his phone, calls a cab, and gets in.

“take me to the airport.”

Notes for the Chapter:

my specialty is emotional whiplash.

[pinterest](#) / [shark puppy merch](#) / [yell at me](#)

Author's Note:

im always @eddiekissbrak on tumblr